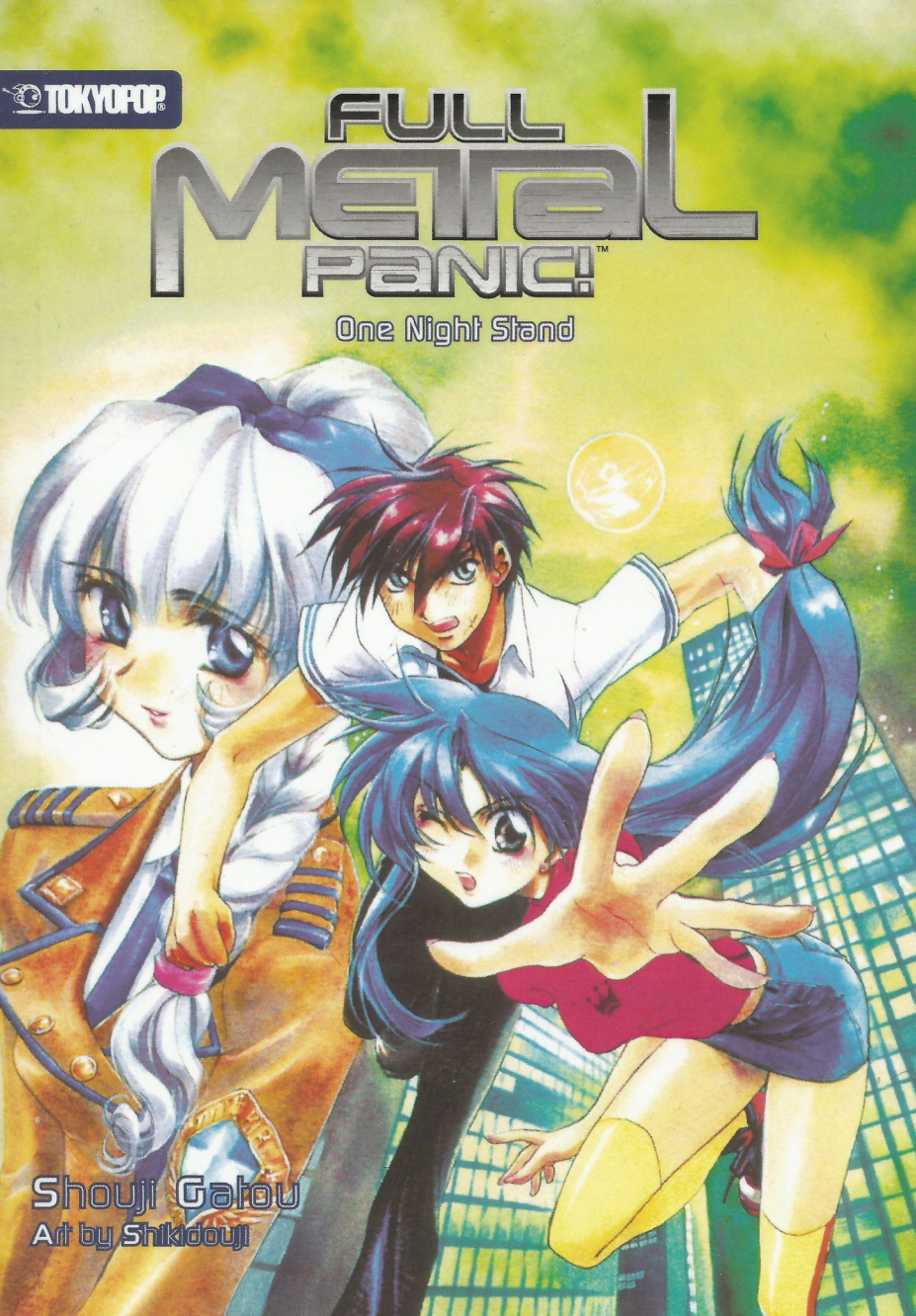
TOKYOPOP®

FULL METAL PANIC!™

One Night Stand



Shouji Gatou
Art by Shikidouji

FULL METAL PANIC!™

One Night Stand

Volume 2

Story by Shouji Gatou

Art by Shikidouji

POP FICTION

A TOKYOPOP® Prose Novel

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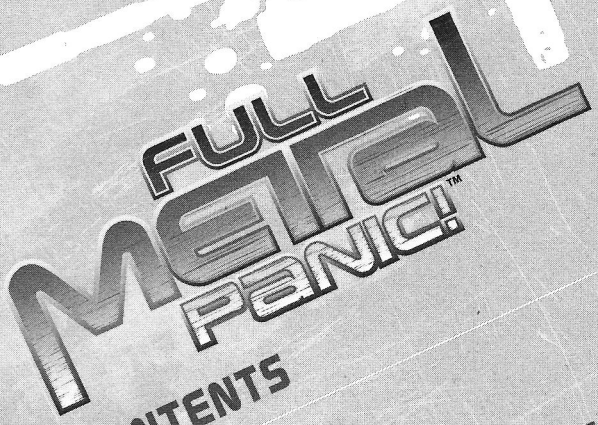
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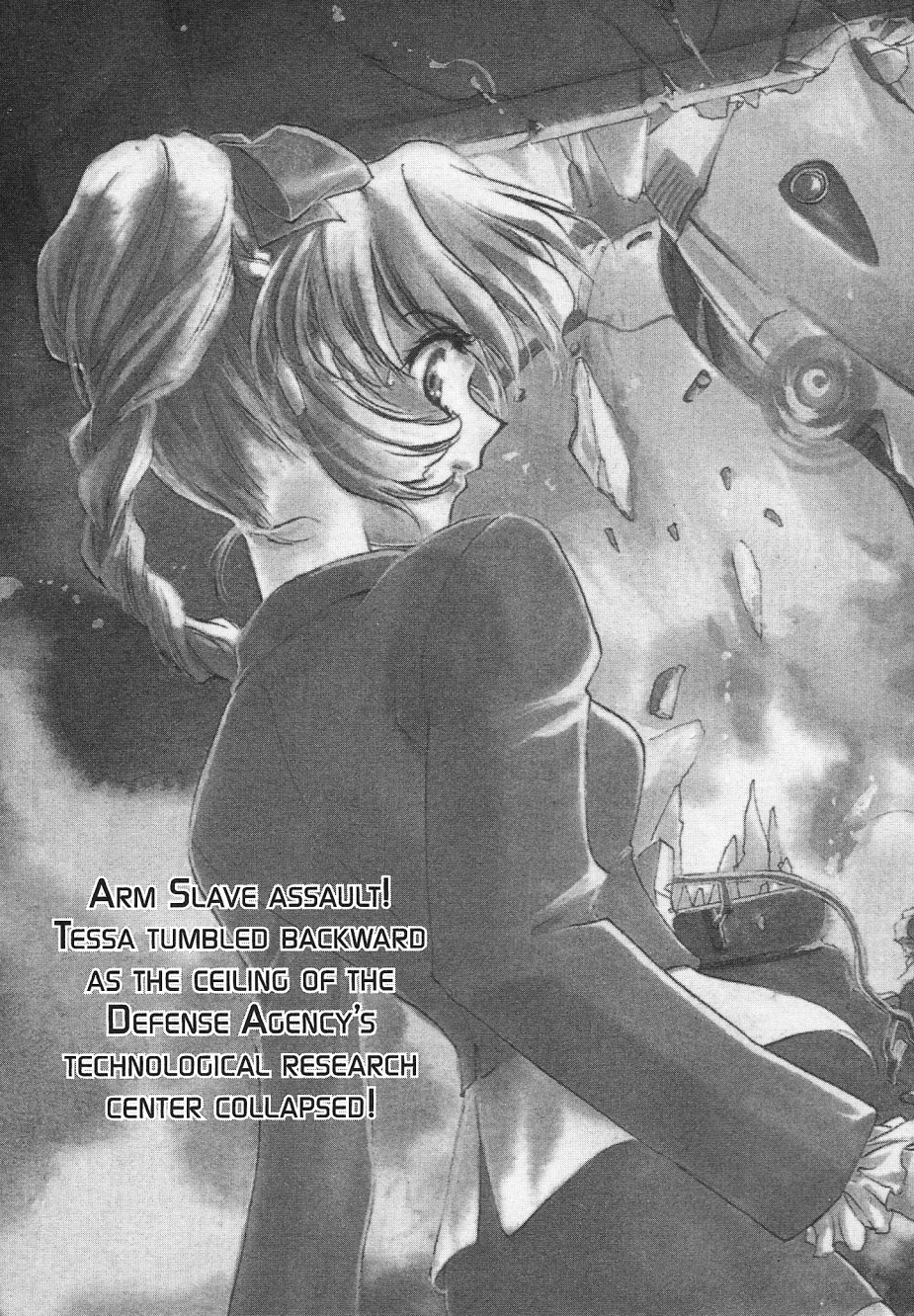
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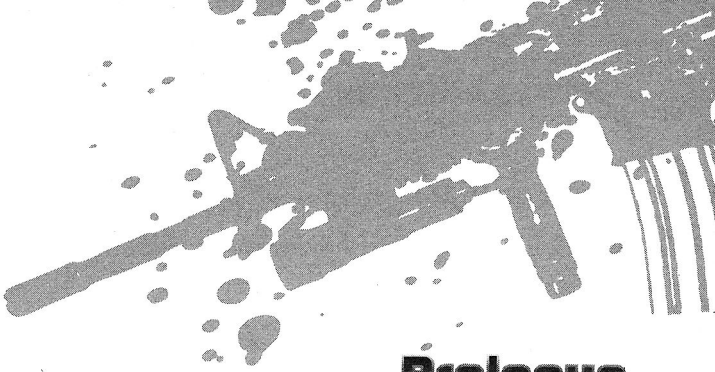
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"I hate you, you oaf!"
Angrily, Kaname struck
Sousuke squarely on the
back of his head—and deep
in his heart.


ARM SLAVE ASSAULT!
TESSA TUMBLED BACKWARD AS THE CEILING OF THE DEFENSE AGENCY'S TECHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH CENTER COLLAPSED!




Things were looking potentially disastrous from his position— literally, between the freshly bathed Tessa and the suddenly stony Kaname. Sousuke stiffened and began to sweat.



Prologue

Lunchtime on the rooftop provided a sanctuary from vigilant teachers' eyes. Although it was smack in the middle of rainy season, the weather was fair: The sky was blue, and the strong sun reflected pure white off the rooftop.

A boy and a girl stood near a remote corner of the roof.

Standing with her back against the roof's railing, the short-haired girl stared down with a troubled expression. Smoke drifted upward from the cigarette in the right hand of the long-haired male in front of her.

"So, you don't like me after all, Noriko?" he asked

"It's not like that. I . . . I do like you, Mikio."

"It's been two months since we started dating, and all we've done is kiss!" he protested.

"Well . . ." Noriko searched for her answer. "I guess I'm scared."

Annoyed, Mikio exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. "We're not in middle school anymore, you know. We really should, you know, get to know each other better."

"Maybe we can get to know each other in other ways," she suggested.

"That's not enough. We need to—"

Blam!

A gunshot interrupted their conversation. Mikio and Noriko's attention instantly turned toward the source of the sound: the top of the water tower protruding from the roof.

On the edge of the tower, a male student with a sullen face and tight-lipped mouth was lying face down, aiming a rifle. Around the sniper, whose gun barrel pointed toward the area of the campus, there were toolboxes, ammo cases, and other supplies that looked almost like green coffee cans.

The sniper was Sousuke Sagara, a second year student in class four. This transfer student was the class "war nut," a repatriate who had grown up in international trouble zones and lacked all understanding of how to live in a peaceful environment.

"Hm." Surveying his distant target through binoculars, Sousuke made a note on a clipboard before taking out another round and

loading it in the rifle. Taking careful aim at a different corner of the campus, he fired again.

After the heavy gunshot, Sousuke checked the results through his binoculars. Tilting his head with dissatisfaction, he made another mark on his clipboard. At that point, he noticed Mikio and Noriko staring at him and said, "Carry on, guys. Don't mind me."

He loaded the next round into his rifle, completely unconcerned with the onlookers. After a brief moment of silence, they awkwardly resumed their conversation.

"So, um, as I was saying: Isn't it about time? Are we lovers or what?"

"Well, I suppose—"

Ba-kow!

"You're important to me, Noriko."

"I know, Mikio, and that's good—"

Ba-kow!

"I want to deepen my bond with the girl I like. It's perfectly natural."

"I'd like to do that, too—"

"Really? Let's go for it, then. You know, tonight—"

Ba-kow!

"Tonight, my parents are—"

Ba-kow! Ba-kow!

"Tonight—"

Ba-kow! Ba-kow!

"Aw, godammit!" Pushed to his boiling point, Mikio mussed his hair and ran over to the base of the water tower, where he took a deliberate drag on his cigarette.

"Hey!" Mikio shouted up to Sousuke.

"Yes?"

"Knock it off! Go do that somewhere else!"

Raising an eyebrow, Sousuke appeared to consider it for a moment. "I can't do that. This tower is optimal for test firing."

"What's so damn 'optimal' about it?"

"It's about nine hundred feet from here to the corner of the campus, which is an ideal distance for me to confirm the accuracy of this new rifle while trying out different kinds of cartridges. Oddly enough, this gun seems to work best with Egyptian ammo. I might try out some of the gunpowder mixes I made myself, which—"

In the middle of Sousuke's rambling—which was a much more thorough explanation than Mikio cared to hear—the door beneath the water tower flung open and a girl came flying out.

"Sousuke!"

"Chidori."

It was Kaname Chidori, the school's student council vice-president. A red ribbon tied around her long black hair accented her blue and white uniform. She glared daggers at Sousuke.

"I knew it was you! Enough with this 'bang bang' business. We're trying to study for a test!"

"But there's been so much rain lately. I want to test this in the sun. Don't worry, I'll be done with gunpowder group A in ten more shots. Just let me—"

"No! Absolutely not! Stop right now!"

"But—" he pleaded.

"I said to cut it out, dammit!"

Hastily removing one of her shoes, Kaname took aim at Sousuke and chucked it.

Although Sousuke ducked, the shoe struck him in the shoulder and smacked one of the green cans at his feet. The lidless can toppled from the tower, sprinkling its fine black powder through the air, directly over the head of Mikio, whose cigarette still dangled from his mouth. More precisely, it was a lit cigarette. And upon closer inspection the label on the green can read "gunpowder."

"Augh!"

Bwoosh! Mikio dropped the cigarette and ducked for cover as a small explosion shoved him forward.

Screaming, his back on fire, he ran wildly around the roof, as if from the tale of *Kachikachi-yama.*

"Help! Augh! Mommy!"

"Mikio!" Noriko screamed, as Mikio dropped to the ground and began to roll around.

Kaname ran up, brandishing a fire extinguisher. "Move!" Squeezing the lever, she covered Mikio in white powder, extinguishing the fire from his back.

As the white smoke cleared, he trembled on the floor, convulsing slightly.

"Whew, that was close." Kaname wiped the sweat from her forehead.

Having collected his gear and stashed it in his backpack, Sousuke nimbly descended the water tower and walked up to Mikio.

"She put it out quickly. His burns are minor."

"This is so typical, Sagara! Although it's true that I bear some responsibility . . ." Kaname punctuated her sentence by bashing Sousuke with the empty fire extinguisher.

Dazed, he said: "That's quite painful."

"Shut up! Don't bring explosives to school!"

"They're not prohibited by the school regulations."

"You want me to hit you again?"

They resembled a king cobra and a mongoose, Kaname holding the extinguisher above her head and Sousuke cautiously backing away. Another explosive situation!

Ring, ring, ring!

Sousuke raised one hand to signal a time-out while he pulled a small cell phone from his breast pocket.

"Urzu Seven here," he answered. "Okay. Thirteen-hundred twenty-five hours. The RV at Point Echo. Roger. I'm on my way." Then, after retrieving his belongings, he scuttled toward the roof's exit.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Something urgent came up. Stay here."

"Wait a minute, I'm not finished with—"

Disregarding Kaname's threats, Sousuke disappeared through the doorway.

"Hey, Sousuke," she called, "you better not forget our plans for tonight! Jeez!"

After staring at the door for a moment, Kaname put her hands on her hips and sighed. Finally, she turned back to the quivering mass of Mikio and his sobbing girlfriend.

"Um, let's get him to the nurse's office." Kaname smiled apologetically.



CHAPTER 1
Foreign Ways

June 24, 14:01 (Japan Standard Time)
Narita, Chiba Prefecture, Japan
Tokyo International Airport

Where am I? wondered the young man as he pulled his rolling suitcase through the international arrivals line. He teetered through a corridor full of people and windows.

This is airport customs. That's right, I've been gone for a year and a half for training and adjustment. I'm here to do something. Right, do something.

The next worry arose: *What?*

Oh, that's right! I've come to operate it*—the mech like a demon, which no one else can handle. Once it starts to move, it'll never be stopped. With that ultimate power, I'll sow destruction and fear. I'll kill a lot of people and break a lot of stuff. Yes, I'll go to that city I hate so much and I'll . . .*

Wait, who am I?

A sense of disgust tightened the irritated boy's throat.

That's right. My name is Takuma Kugayama. I'm fifteen years old, and I've just come back from my studies in New Zealand. That's the story. My name's really Takuma Tatekawa, though. I'm a member of the A21 group, I'm special.

Ah. I feel bad . . . angry. Maybe I should've taken the medicine, after all. I'll be okay, though; I can deal with it for a while.

The customs official approached. No, Takuma approached the customs agent.

A middle-aged man in his forties, eh? His necktie, it's kind of crooked—maybe just by four degrees, but I can't stand it. I want him to fix it. Hurry up and fix it, mister!

Desperately suppressing the urge to thrust his hands toward the older man's neck, Takuma smiled and presented his passport. *Stupid man,* he thought, as the man took the passport without suspicion and looked it over.

"A home stay?" asked the man in uniform.

"No, sir," Takuma answered in a calm, angelic voice, "short-term study abroad."

"Wow. By yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

Of course. Fix your tie.

"Aren't your parents worried about you?"

"Not really. They trust me."

His smile belied his thoughts. *I really want to hurt someone, tear him to pieces. Then, I'd feel good, and my sister would be pleased. Or would she? Maybe not.*

I wonder what she thinks. Sister, my precious sister, came back to this country a long time ago in order to get that demon ready to move . . . for me. I will see her soon. Sister.

The official stamped the passport without so much as attempting a luggage inspection.

". . . can go."

"What?"

"I said, 'you can go.'"

"Wh-what about the necktie?"

Hurry up and fix it. It's pissing me off. What's your problem? You suck. You should die.

"What are you talking about?"

"Um, uh . . ."

Sis, I don't like this guy. He won't fix it.

"You okay, son?"

"Augh!"

He's making a fool of me, sister. I can't have that.

"Hey—"

Screaming, Takuma jumped over the counter, knocking down the official, whom he proceeded to pin to the floor and pummel without mercy. Grabbing the man's neck with both hands, he put all his strength into it. He began to feel better. *More. More!*

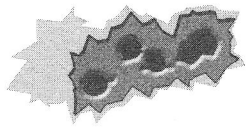
"Gah!"

"Ha! Ha ha!"

As Takuma's hands pressed harder into his neck, the official's eyes rolled back. The nearest guard sprung upon Takuma in an attempt to pull him off, but the guard couldn't pry the boy's hands loose.

How about this! You're insignificant, gasping for air and flapping your mouth like a fish out of water. You're about to die! What a stupid face. Oh, sister, it's a riot.

Sister.



June 25, 22:55 (Philippine Standard Time)
Luzon Island, Northern Philippines
25 miles west of Vigan City

In the middle of the jungle was a clearing—within it, a faux city.

It was a maneuvering ground for mock urban combat, and its tawdry, bullet-riddled buildings didn't resemble those of any city in the world.

"You're not here on vacation! Take your enemies down in a single hit!" shouted the lieutenant colonel, his voice rising above the gunshots. "Don't get sluggish! You are dogs, slobbering to tear out enemy jugulars!"

The trainees—fledgling terrorists from all corners of the world—showed no signs of fatigue. Nor did they appear afraid of the instructors' bullets, which crashed constantly at their feet. They quickly followed instructions.

"Everyone you see is an enemy! Kill! Show no mercy, even to children!"

Tattered silhouette targets popped up in windows, doors, and alleys. Bullets struck them with dry, metallic clanks. Somewhere inside one of the structures, a hand grenade exploded.

Eventually, the gunfire stopped, and a chorus of radios sounded out: "Clear." Holding an assault rifle in one hand and a stopwatch

in the other, the lieutenant colonel stared intently at the second hand until the final gunshot rang.

"Clear!"

He thumbed the stopwatch button and harrumphed. Noting the time it took for the mock battle to conclude, he snorted.

"Line up!" shouted the adjutant captain, who was standing next to the lieutenant colonel.

Trainees trickled from every corner of the site to line up in front of the duo. Standing there in grayish urban camouflage combat uniforms, there were more than fifteen trainees of disparate races. Approximately twenty percent of the trainees were female.

"Now," the lieutenant colonel cleared his throat, "It's been three weeks since your training started. I won't lie: I thought you were all hopeless incompetents. It looks as if that's not the case, though. During this training, two have died and two have deserted. Frankly, that doesn't matter. The rest of you are becoming passably decent killers. Now, don't let that go to your heads."

The lieutenant colonel then spent five minutes humbling the trainees with a critique, bemoaning their inexperience, their insufficient mastery of their equipment, their lack of knowledge of each country's security force, and more.

"Understood?" he finally asked. "You don't harbor enough hatred. Hate more. Hate me and everything else in this world. Once you do that, the putrid police forces and militaries will be no match for you. That is all."

"Questions?" asked the adjutant captain.

After a moment of silence, one of the trainees slowly raised a hand.

"Speak."

"Sir, it is my understanding that, upon leaving here, we'll be on par with military and police forces. What if the opponent is neither of those?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mithril, sir."

With his eyebrows raised, the lieutenant colonel said, "Mithril? What's that?"

"Before coming here, I'd heard rumors of them from an arms merchant in Singapore. Apparently, it's a special forces group unaffiliated with any nation, sir. Supposedly, the group is made up of people with incredible capabilities; if you're ever in their sights, you won't make it out unharmed."

"Nonsense! Rumors, exaggerations, and scuttlebutt."

"Yes, sir. However, there are many who actually have seen them. I've heard that sometimes they attack training camps, such as this one, obstructing the activities of revolutionaries like us—"

"That's enough out of you!" barked the lieutenant colonel, grabbing the trainee by the collar. "Who cares about Mithril? Are you spouting that nonsense to mock my training?"

"S-sir, please forgive—" the hands on the man's throat prevented him from saying more.

The other trainees exchanged glances and whispers.

"I've heard of them, too."

"Yeah, did you hear about that thing in Sunan a while back?"

"They might come after this place, too."

When the lieutenant colonel shot them a glare, the trainees ceased gossiping.

"It seems I'm guilty of a grave misunderstanding!" he shouted, without any attempt to disguise his anger. "I guess you didn't learn anything in the last three weeks. Attacked? This place? The military can't touch us! Look around you!"

All around the makeshift base, there were tanks, armored vehicles, anti-aircraft missiles and guns, and even two attack helicopters (albeit, slightly older models).

And, of course, there were the two dark green Arm Slaves—armored, humanoid attack weapons that measured twenty-six feet tall. Supposedly equal in firepower to a hundred foot soldiers, the Arm Slave was the most powerful weapon for modern land war.

"No force large enough to stand against this much firepower could ever approach without us noticing it—not even the American military!" hollered the lieutenant colonel with unwavering confidence.

In fact, there was a reliable net of sensors that spread outward like a spider web as far as twelve miles from the base. It would take feats of superhuman skill to slip through the warning system and launch a surprise attack.

"Just think about it! This base is impenetrable! That's why you're all so severely hazed. No matter what happens, no force *ever* could take us by sur—"

As if to spite him, arrows of flame ripped through the sky, striking a tank thirty feet to the trainees' right. One, two, three shots, followed by a piercing metallic sound.

"Wha—?"

After vomiting sparks for a moment, the tank exploded as if bursting open.

The intense blast knocked the officers and trainees off their feet. Almost immediately, the AS next to the tank took a hit and blew to pieces, creating a spectacle like a red cloudburst raining over the base.

It's coming from the sky? What is it? How did our radar miss it? The lieutenant colonel looked to the heavens for answers.

At first, he couldn't make out the attacking force—but upon scrutinizing the night sky, he noticed the starlight shimmering, pulsing as if in a heat wave.

"What the—?"

Suddenly, the quivering air swelled with blue lightning, and three shadows leaked like ink from the weak light.

ECS. Its hologram technology made it the ultimate stealth equipment. But no one had been able to develop complete invisibility!

The three shadows looked like paratroopers, intermittently firing their guns as they descended toward the base.

Only three? Wait, those aren't soldiers. They're way too big to be human. Yes, those are—

"Arm Slaves!"

The parachuting Arm Slaves were a model unfamiliar to the lieutenant colonel. Their gray armor looked rounder than usual,

and they were extremely humanoid in appearance. They looked both slender and powerful.

Could these unfamiliar gray mechs be Mithril?

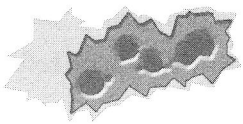
Somehow, the three huge machines looked graceful as they cut their parachutes one hundred sixty feet above the base, plummeting the remaining distance. They were like ancient mythical beasts that had been released from their chains.

As soon as they hit the ground, the Arm Slaves attacked freely: They tore armored vehicles and helicopters to shreds with their giant shotguns and rifles. They kicked over Jeeps and hacked down watchtowers. Confused soldiers scattered beneath machine gun fire.

"Resistance is futile. Surrender!" announced a young woman through one of the mechs' external speakers.

Firing tasers from the palm of its hand, one of the mechs incapacitated fleeing trainees, who collapsed from electric shock.

Helpless, the lieutenant colonel could only watch as his base quickly crumbled.



"Destruction and seizure of primary target confirmed," announced the mech's AI in its low, male voice. "Switch to enemy search mode?"

"Affirmative. Switch to active."

"Roger. ECS: off. ECCS: on."

Sousuke Sagara diligently peered at the image on the forward screen of the cockpit that enveloped his body.

His AS was called an M9 Gernsback, which was the most commonly used AS model in Mithril's arsenal. (Mithril was the mercenary group that employed Sousuke.) The M9 was the latest high-powered mech, not even used in the most modern militaries.

Flames erupted throughout the jungle base, engulfing everything from the tanks and armored vehicles to the terrorists' beloved Arm Slaves. The enemy soldiers who were still conscious, about fifty people total, surrendered. They stood in the central plaza of their artificial city with their hands in the air.

Periodically, one would try to make a break for it—but Sousuke and his companions mercilessly tasered runaways.

The mission was nearly over. The only task left was to detain the Japanese terrorists they had come for before handing over the rest to the Philippine government.

From the opposite side of the base, the pilot of the mech that was keeping guard called to Sousuke on his wireless radio: "Piece of cake, eh, Sousuke?" commented Sergeant Kurz Weber, one of Sousuke's colleagues.

"It's too soon to let our guard down," Sousuke answered calmly. "There still might be heavily armed ambush troops."

"Don't worry. This M9 could take a rocket without flinching!"

"I'm more worried about the prisoners. If they die from stray bullets, then we came here for nothing."

"Be nice, you heartless man. I'm getting over a cold, you know."

"More important, could you confirm the target?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

Kurz's M9 stepped toward the prisoners, and he spoke through the external speaker. "Excuse me. I'm looking for the Japanese trainees here, particularly the young members of the A21 group. Come forward and we won't kill or harm you. Promise."

Holding their silence, the prisoners glanced at their neighbors, wondering who among them was wanted.

"Anybody? Hey, you guys over there—take off those masks."

Faced with the M9's tasers, several men hastily removed their balaclavas. Sousuke magnified the image on his screen and studied their faces.

"They're not here."

Although some appeared to have Japanese features, none matched the photo from the search instructions.

"You're right. What's going on here?"

The mission briefing stated that a group of Japanese terrorists called A2I would be there. Several years ago, the group had plotted to detonate a bomb in a major metropolitan area; when the plan was discovered, the group fled overseas, presumably to hatch more terrorist schemes.

"They're definitely not here."

At that moment, Master Sergeant Melissa Mao's M9 returned from the pursuit of those who had fled into the jungle. The mech held four tasered-to-the-point-of-drooling terrorists in its arms.

"I don't have them, either. Looks like we drew a blank."

"Another false lead? Damn those intelligence guys!" In accordance with its operator's movements, Kurz's M9 kicked a nearby oil drum, and the prisoners shuddered.

"It happens. There's nothing we can do if they're not here. Let's hand these guys over to the Philippine military and get to the rendezvous point with the transport helicop—" Sousuke stopped suddenly, a cloud of distress coming over his face. He let out a sound that was the offspring of a sigh and a groan.

"What's wrong?" inquired Kurz, noticing that Sousuke's M9 was shaking its head.

"I forgot," Sousuke lamented.

Surveying the surroundings with his rifle ready, Kurz said, "Forgot what? You're usually so careful. Don't tell me you did something idiotic like forgetting the radio encryption!"

"Worse."

"Whoa! Whoa!"

"I . . . promised to meet someone . . . today, at nineteen hundred hours."

"Huh?"

"She's probably furious."

A cold sweat broke on his temple. His panic seemed inappropriate for someone who had executed combat orders with measured calm a few minutes earlier.

"Promised? Who?"

"*Kaname.* I was supposed to be at her place. She was going to help me study for a final. Japanese History is not my strong suit."

Showing the complexity of the M9's joint construction, the shoulders of Kurz's AS sagged. "Don't *do* that, man."

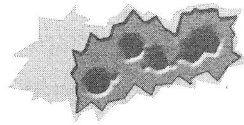
"Must be a tough gig, moonlighting as a soldier," commented Mao, tossing the unconscious terrorists into the group of prisoners.

"The Philippine military's transport helicopter should be here in five minutes. We can question these guys until then. As soon as we hand them over, we'll move out toward our RV, got it?"

"Urzu Six, roger."

"Urzu Seven, roger," Sousuke responded, dispirited.

It was not uncommon for Sousuke Sagara, soldier in the top-secret special-forces unit Mithril, to struggle mightily with his other occupation, Tokyo high school student.



June 25, 15:18 (Greenwich Mean Time)
Luzon Strait, Depth: 165 Feet
Amphibious Assault Submarine Tuatha de Danaan

"We missed them?"

A small crease formed in Tessa's brow as she listened to the rest of Master Sergeant Melissa Mao's report.

Tessa—a.k.a. Teletha Testarossa, the captain of the amphibious assault submarine called the Tuatha de Danaan—sat in the captain's chair in the central command center of Mithril's giant submarine. From this room, which was about the size of a small theater, Tessa had supreme command over the ship and its squadrons. She looked down at three large screens and the seats of about a dozen command center personnel.

She was a girl in her mid-teens with large gray eyes and braided ash blonde hair that hung over her left shoulder. Although she wore informal, tan civilian clothes, they bore the rank insignia of COL.

"Yes, ma'am. There was no trace of the A2I organization at all," Mao answered over the radio.

"No one present was connected in any way?"

"When we put the screws on the camp leader, he said a few Japanese observers visited the camp ten days ago."

"Where did they go after that?"

"He thought he'd heard them say they were going from Manila to the Gold Coast, but that's just hearsay. He doesn't really know anything."

"So, they pretended to enter the camp and then ran off. We've been had."

The intelligence report suggested that the A21 group had entered the training camp to finalize its training. Apparently, that information was false.

"I'm sorry," apologized Tessa, "for sending you on a wild goose chase."

"It's not your fault, Tessa," replied Mao. "I guess we'll head for the RV now—with your permission, of course."

"Yes, please return on schedule. We'll be waiting."

"Roger. Over and out."

On the corner of the captain's display screen, where a window indicated who was speaking, the words "Urzu Two" changed from red to green. Tessa sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"Good grief."

"It happens all the time," offered the Executive Officer, Commander Richard Mardukas. He was tall and thin, resembling an engineer. Through his dark glasses, he turned his melancholy gaze toward the forward screen.

"Frequency doesn't make it any less problematic," Tessa concluded, glancing at Mardukas' profile. "Doesn't the A21 group have Soviet-made Arm Slaves? If they were to unleash those on a city, the consequences would be terrible."

"Of course, Captain. However, we are not omnipotent, and it's necessary to accept that these mistakes can happen."

"That's laziness talking."

Tessa had so much equipment and so many personnel that she expected her forces to be as close to omnipotent as possible. In her head, she imagined flawless intelligence and flawless strategy.

"It isn't laziness," Mardukas corrected flatly. "It's flexibility."

The ship's AI sounded an alarm to summon Tessa.

"What is it?"

"Circuit GI. Lieutenant Commander A. Kalinin." It was a communication from Andrei Kalinin, the operational commander, who was in Japan on a separate mission.

"Patch him through."

"Aye, ma'am."

A moment later, they were connected. Kalinin's low voice filled the room: "Captain, how was the mission at the training camp?"

"It was a total failure. The terror group in question wasn't present."

Kalinin didn't sound especially surprised. "A2I, you mean? I heard that one of its members got arrested at Narita Airport."

"That's good to hear," she said after a slight pause. "You say that like it's bad news, though."

"Yes, ma'am. The captured boy exhibits signs of the *reaction*."

Hearing that, Tessa's face fell. "You mean—"

"There's a high probability he has the ability to operate a Lambda Driver."

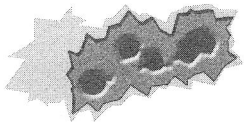
The Lambda Driver was a mysterious piece of equipment with limitless potential for danger if it fell into the wrong hands. Using the operator's mind as fuel, it had the power to render nukes powerless.

And now, a ruthless terrorist group had gotten hold of one of the rare people capable of using one.

"He's in the custody of the Japanese government, so we can't make a detailed investigation—nonetheless, I think you should come out here personally, Captain."

"I understand," she assented. "We'll make the arrangements." With that, she cut the connection.

Again. Who are these people? Who on Earth would use such a dangerous thing?



June 26, 10:01 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Jindai Municipal High School Campus

Skimming past the top of the metal bat, the white ball smacked into the catcher's mitt.

"Steeeeeee-rike three!" shouted one of the girls in a gym uniform.

"That's three outs, right?" confirmed the preoccupied umpire. "Okay, let's change it up!"

The girls on the field ran in to take a crack at batting.

"Whew!" Kaname Chidori swung her right arm around as she descended from the pitcher's mound.

Although she was tall, her black hair reached her hips. Her excellent proportions were apparent, even through her bland gym uniform. When she was quiet, she was a girl with an air of strength and nobility.

"Kana, that was three strikeouts in a row!" commented classmate Kyouko Tokiwa.

"Well," Kaname began, wearing the humble expression of a gym class participant, "that's about par for me." She flashed a carefree peace sign.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, this is just PE softball. You're being so serious about it, though. It's silly. Shiori looked downright terrified!"

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes, really. You're awfully surly. Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed today or what?"

"Well, it's either obvious or you're pretty sharp, Kyouko."

In fact, Kyouko could not be fooled. She and Kaname had been friends since the school entrance ceremony.

"Did something happen with Sagara?" she asked, hitting the bull's-eye.

Indeed, Sousuke Sagara was to blame for Kaname's foul mood. The previous morning, they had arranged (at least as a pretense) to study for final exams. Sousuke was supposed to show up at her place at seven that night. Of course, he never came.

When Kaname had tried to call his cell phone, he was apparently "out of range." Eight o'clock came and then nine . . . the date changed, and suddenly, it was morning. And that day, when Kaname went home after school, the food she had prepared affectionately for Sousuke at the expense of her own studying still would be sitting on the dining room table of the apartment where Kaname lived alone.

"Hm," she grunted. "No, Sagara didn't do anything. It's unrelated."

"I knew it." Kyouko saw right through Kaname's fib. "Do you know why he's not in school today?"

In the gym behind them, a group of boys playing basketball shouted and hollered. Sousuke was not among them.

"I don't know," Kaname grunted. "He took off yesterday during lunch, and I haven't seen him since."

"So, what'd he do, then?"

"I don't really care what he did. I told you—it isn't him."

This was an outright lie. Kaname wouldn't have slaved over such a menu if she didn't care. It was a feast comprising salt-broiled mackerel, squid and daikon radish stew, pitan tofu, chawanmushi, and more.

Kaname sighed.

"Hey," Kyouko said, poking Kaname's shoulder, "you're up to bat."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Rising, Kaname grabbed a bat and sauntered to the plate. Suddenly, she heard the low howl of an engine and rotors hacking through the air. Looking to the sky, however, she saw no sign of the helicopter she was certain she had heard.

Huh. Oh well.

Then, without ceremony, the opposing pitcher gave the ball an underhand toss. It traced a slow parabola and fell into view. Kaname imagined it to be Sousuke's overly serious face floating through the air.

Sousuke, you . . .

"Son of bitch!" she hollered, swinging the bat with all her might.

Ching! The ball flew up, up, up, toward left field. It was a great hit, and the outfielder had to scurry backward to get under it.

The team erupted in cheers.

The ball sailed through the air—before stopping dead in midair and falling straight to the ground in front of the girl in left field. It was as though the ball had hit an invisible wall.

Just as flabbergasted as everyone else who'd assumed it was a certain homer, Kaname stopped shy of second base. Everyone stared at the sky over left field.

I don't see anything, Kaname thought. *Hey, wait, did the air just shimmer a little?*

The helicopter sounds grew louder, and a strong wind blasted the field, kicking up a cloud of dust so thick that visibility was reduced to less than ten feet.

"What the hell?" Kaname shouted, almost unable to hear her own voice. The fierce wind hurt her eyes, so she hit the deck, practically clinging to second base.

The mysterious roar began to recede as suddenly as it had approached. The violent wind subsided, and stillness returned to the softball field.

Kaname lifted her head. Again, there was no sign of anything in the air—no helicopter, no plane, nothing.

"What *was* that?" she mumbled.

As she climbed to her feet, Kaname noticed a male student in summer clothes standing in front of her.

About five foot nine, he had a slim, tight physique. A large olive backpack hung over his right shoulder, and he held a black bag in his left hand.

"Sousuke?"

Sousuke studied his surroundings.

"Chidori," he acknowledged.

Although Sousuke was conventionally handsome, his features always were constrained by a look of severe tension. His brow was forever creased, his mouth drawn tight, his eyes looking far into the distance. Indifferent to fashion, his black hair still seemed naturally adequate.

"Looks like I'm two hours late," Sousuke announced, checking his wristwatch against the school's clock. "Good thing I hurried back."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Kaname, stifling the desire to knock his block off.

"I just got here," he explained. "I came straight from the South China Sea."

Kaname was speechless.

"So, you guys are in the middle of a game?" Sousuke checked, staring rudely at Kaname's gym uniform.

"Yes, we *were.* Until *someone* interrupted by flying in mysteriously and totally ruining my home run."

"Well, at least you'll know to be careful the next time you hear a helicopter," he decided. "I'm going to the boys' gym class, then."

With that, he headed for the basketball game. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back. "By the way . . ." he started.

"Yes?"

"About our meeting yesterday—are you mad?"

"Oh, no. I'm not mad in the *slightest.* Why would that bother me?" she ranted, theatrically throwing her hands in the air to augment the sarcasm.

It was lost on Sousuke, however. "Oh, good. When I remembered it, I thought you might be angry."

Kaname seethed for a moment. "You forgot?"

"Correct. Some urgent business came up."

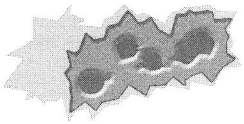
Once again, Sousuke headed for the gym, his backpack swinging to and fro as he went. Kaname watched for a moment, her clenched fists trembling. Then, she picked up second base.

"You . . ." she seethed, hurling the base like a Frisbee.

Right on the money, it smacked Sousuke in the back of the head. Noiselessly, Sousuke collapsed to the ground, flinging his backpack and bag forward.

"I hate your guts, you oaf!"

At that point, the infielder with the ball walked up to Kaname and tagged her out.



June 26, 10:28 (Japan Standard Time)
Saitama Prefecture, Japan
Outskirts of Sayama

Six hours had passed since the helicopter departed the Tuatha de Danaan, which had been stationed in the Pacific Ocean.

After that extended length of time, the engine's roar seemed to transform into a lullaby of sorts. Light danced through the window, and the craft rocked creakily. All in all, Teletha Testarossa found it a suitable environment for a nap.

She didn't dream. The depths of her consciousness, normally a torrent of thoughts, were temporarily as placid as a lake.

"Colonel."

It took Tessa a moment to realize someone had addressed her.

"Colonel, three more minutes."

The Tuatha de Danaan's land combat personnel referred to Tessa, their squadron commander, as "colonel" instead of "captain." This was one of Mithril's unique customs to avoid confusion with the lower, non-naval rank of captain.

Stirring, Tessa groggily opened her eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you, Colonel," said Corporate Yang, a young man in civilian clothes. He was of South Korean descent, had an "Urzu" call sign, and currently was acting as a guard for Tessa.

"What about Mister Sagara?" Tessa asked, looking around the cabin.

"The sergeant landed in Tokyo a while ago and said to give you his regards, ma'am."

"I see."

Like Corporal Yang, Sousuke Sagara had an "Urzu" call sign. Since Sousuke's current assignment had him enrolled in a Tokyo high school, there weren't many opportunities for Tessa, an NCO, to speak to him. Consequently, they didn't have a particularly close relationship.

For some reason, however, Tessa took an interest in Sousuke. Perhaps it was because, like Tessa, Sousuke was the youngest in his unit. It made her nervous to think about what kind of life he led at the school.

Peering into a handheld mirror, Tessa straightened herself out, fixing the collar of her blouse and tugging the hem of her tight skirt into place.

She gazed out the window at their destination.

In the middle of conifer-covered hills, there was a clearing full of straight, white buildings. Upon first glance, it appeared to be a college campus. A closer inspection revealed its differences—mainly, the high outer walls with men in camouflage patrolling them. In actuality, it was a technological research center run by the Japanese government and Defense Agency.

Tessa had heard from several sources that this place was very confidential—and that most citizens didn't know it existed.

Currently, the facility held *the boy in question.*

It was a good thing they had caught the boy, even if by pure coincidence. Left free, he might have brought about terrible disaster.

"Now landing," announced the pilot as he brought down the helicopter to rest on a landing pad that looked rather small for a machine as large as theirs. Regardless, it was a much easier landing than an improvised one in a rocky field surrounded by exploding gunfire.

After alighting, Corporal Yang assisted Tessa down the ramp.

Lieutenant Commander Andrei Kalinin waited for them under the rotor's strong gusts. He was Russian, in his forties, and the man responsible for commanding the Tuatha de Danann's land combat forces. He arrived at the research center one step ahead of Tessa.

Standing next to Tessa, the tall (nearly six foot three), broad-shouldered man looked like he could have been her father. He kept his gray hair pulled back tight, away from his chiseled face, which sported a gray beard.

"Thanks for coming out here, Colonel," he boomed, easily matching the helicopter's volume.

"Please, don't thank me. You wouldn't call me out here without a good reason, right?"

Although it could've been taken as a snide remark, Kalinin took no offense. "Yes, ma'am."

While on the ship, Kalinin always wore a drab, olive combat uniform. Now, however, he wore a brown suit. He was curt, yet somehow he still came off as oddly refined.

"Who is this person?" Tessa indicated the Japanese man behind Kalinin. Dressed in a dull, blue suit, the man looked like a government official. He was in his late thirties, slightly overweight, and definitely myopic.

"Shimamura of the Ministry of Transport," he introduced himself in excellent English. "I'm in charge of this case."

"Nice to meet you, Mister Shimamura."

"Likewise, *Doctor* Testarossa." Shimamura bowed, skillfully masking the deep misgivings he had about Tessa. Usually, when people learned that such a key player in the Mithril organization was a sixteen-year-old girl, they either laughed or became enraged. Since Mister Shimamura did neither, Tessa assumed Kalinin likely had explained already.

"What a surprise, though! How young and lovely you are! I mistook you for a middle school student. You don't look thirty at all!"

"Excuse me?"

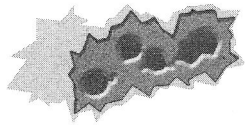
"Forgive me! How rude to mention a lady's age!" bowing again, Shimamura began to lead the way.

Staying rooted in place, Tessa glared at Kalinin. "What did you tell him, Lieutenant Commander?"

"I said that you were an *ordinary genius*," Kalinin answered calmly. "Regarding your age, I didn't think he would buy it. It seems I was wrong."

"Thirty?" Tessa asked, examining her compact body, wishing she had a mirror to study her face. She turned to Corporal Yang. "Do I really look that old?"

"I couldn't say, ma'am," Yang dodged, smiling. "Don't you try to look that old, though?"



There was a black trailer on an old, unpaved road about a half mile from the research center. A cluster of men and women stood around the trailer.

They were all young, all somewhere close to twenty, on one side or the other. Although they wore stylish civilian clothes, they were unusually tense.

They saw the large transport helicopter land at the research center, disappearing behind a clump of trees.

"American military?" asked a man perched atop the trailer. He dropped his binoculars and looked down toward a young woman on the road.

"Nope," she stated. Although it was early summer, she wore a long red coat.

The woman's eyes were long and narrow, and she had cut her chestnut-colored hair into the shape of a mushroom. She looked somewhat old-fashioned.

"No nationality mark," she explained. "Besides, neither the U.S. nor Japanese forces have choppers like that."

"So, whose is it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"It doesn't matter. Our objective is to free Takuma from custody. If anyone—*anyone*—gets in the way, we'll neutralize him. Plain and simple."

"How can you be so cool all the time, Seina?" teased the man. "Takuma's in there! Aren't you worried?"

"Of course, I'm worried," Seina said with no sign of affection. "He is essential to our plan."

"True . . ."

"Without Takuma, Behemoth won't move. But when we fire it up, that demon will squash the defense forces like bugs," announced one of the men.

"Absolutely," agreed another. "No one will be able to stop us then."

"In two days' time, we can reduce that sickening city to a heap of smoldering rubble!"

"Let's get ready to attack," Seina said, interrupting their excited chorus.

Just then, a car jostled along the road—white and black, it was a police car, obviously patrolling the area.

"What do we do?"

"Depends on the driver," Seina answered.

Stopping next to the trailer, the car's passenger door opened, and a patrolman got out. The young cop in the driver's seat showed no interest in moving.

"What are you guys doing?" the police officer asked haughtily. "You're not allowed to drive through here. Who's in charge here? And what's the cargo?"

"Junk," Seina replied, simultaneously pulling a silenced pistol from her right pocket. She aimed the weapon and fired twice.

Kyew! Kyew!

The patrolman died instantly.

Before the young cop in the car figured out what happened, two men opened fire with silenced submachine guns. The shattering windshield made more noise than the gunshots.

"He's dead," announced one of the men, peering in through the driver's window to see the policeman collapsed in a pool of his own blood and agony.

"H-help . . ." groaned the officer.

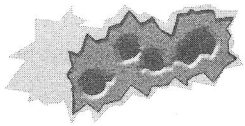
Slightly embarrassed, the man who'd mistakenly announced the death shrugged with embarrassment before firing one final, point-blank shot, putting an end to the policeman's groaning. "It happens sometimes."

"This better be the *last* time," Seina scolded. "Deal with the bodies, and then move out. I'll inspect the mech."

Opening the trailer's rear double-doors, Seina looked at the single Arm Slave inside: It was an Rk-92 Savage, a second-generation AS of Soviet origin.

Seina threw off her coat, revealing an orange pilot suit underneath, which fit snugly against her supple body. If the suit didn't have a clumsy G-force harness and lock-bolt on it, it would have resembled a wetsuit.

"An overture to destruction," she mumbled so quietly that only she could hear.



June 26, 12:33 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Jindai High School, South School Building

"Careful, Sagara. Head injuries are scary stuff," warned Sousuke's classmate, Shinji Kazama, as they walked through the hallway.

Shinji was a quiet-looking student, about half a head shorter than Sousuke. He had a light complexion and bright features, which he usually hid under thin glasses. Lately, however, he had become partial to contact lenses and more stylish attire.

"I'm okay, Kazama," Sousuke replied sullenly, although he certainly did not look okay. Something was wrong—in addition to the potential concussion he'd received that morning.

"I don't think you are," Shinji assessed. "I bet if you died, Chidori would be really sad that she had been the one to kill you, and then she'd probably slit her wrists in the bathroom."

"No, that wouldn't happen," Sousuke declared, remembering how she'd told him earlier that she hated him.

Kaname had ignored Sousuke completely after that morning's trauma. An inherently reticent lad, Sousuke could not come up with a good excuse to talk to her. Rather, he spent the rest of the morning worrying. Now, at lunchtime, he still was concerned.

"Chidori hates me," he explained.

"Ah, the same old story," Kazama sighed. "You grew up on a battlefield, but you can't stand up to a girl. It's pathetic, you know."

"And embarrassing."

It was common knowledge at Jindai High that Sousuke had grown up overseas in danger zones. However, the students were skeptical about much of his biography, and they preferred to simply think of him as "that eccentric, foreign kid" or "the nuisance from abroad."

Then again, no one knew that Sousuke was a member of the top-secret military organization, Mithril—nor that he was one of the most elite soldiers in Mithril's Special Response Team . . . with the exception of one person.

Shinji and Sousuke stopped in front of the student council's office door on the fourth floor.

Somehow, Sousuke had been appointed to the nebulous position of Security Issue Chief Student Council Presidential Aide. It was a figurehead position; during the meetings and events, they assigned him various odd jobs.

Shinji held a more respectable position: Cultural Festival Executive Committee Vice-Chairman. Though the Cultural Festival was still a long way off, Shinji had to attend all the meetings in June to address preparation and budget concerns.

"The president's awfully strict," Shinji decided. "I can't believe she called this meeting when finals start next week."

"Regular reports are a necessary measure," Sousuke responded, opening the door to enter the office.

There were three boys present: two freshmen and the sophomore treasurer. Although the meeting was supposed to start at any moment, the president was nowhere in sight.

"Um, isn't there a meeting today?" asked Shinji.

One of the students in the corner looked up from an LCD TV long enough to say, "Didn't someone tell you? The president postponed all meetings because of the exams next week."

"Oh, we hadn't heard."

"You guys are in class four, right? Vice-president Chidori should have known."

"That sucks. Jeez. Okay, I'm going back to the classroom, then." As Shinji grumbled his way toward the door, he came face to face with Kaname as she entered the room. Although she had been wearing a gym uniform earlier, she now wore a summer outfit consisting of a blue skirt, a short-sleeved white blouse, and a tie of red ribbon.

"Oh, Kazama," she said.

"Hi, Chidori," he muttered, "when we saw you in class, why didn't you tell us the meeting got canceled?"

"I'm sorry, Kazama, I forgot. Please, forgive me. I'll make it up to you. I'll help you with your work next time, okay? Promise."

"Um, it's not that big of a deal," he replied, slightly taken aback. "Uh, try to remember next time, though, please."

"No, it is a *big* deal. I *promised* the president I would tell you. *Breaking a promise* is really terrible. I feel really bad because I left you hanging. If I were you, I'd be angry—someone who *breaks a promise* is totally unforgivable."

A cold sweat broke out on Sousuke's forehead as he listened to the exchange. Shinji sensed the tangible tension.

"Really," Shinji insisted, backing out of the room, "it's not a big deal. I'm going back to the classroom now."

As soon as Shinji disappeared, Kaname's face became gloomy. Turning her grim expression on Sousuke, she grunted before heading to the back of the student council office.

After setting some documents on the president's desk, she plopped down at a corner of the large desk and spread out her study materials.

Sousuke paled. He let his backpack slide off his shoulder and rummaged through it.

Kaname showed no interest whatsoever.

After a moment, he found what he was looking for, extracted it, and walked over to Kaname.

"It's a huge drag, with you lurking here like that," Kaname said harshly, without looking up from her notebook.

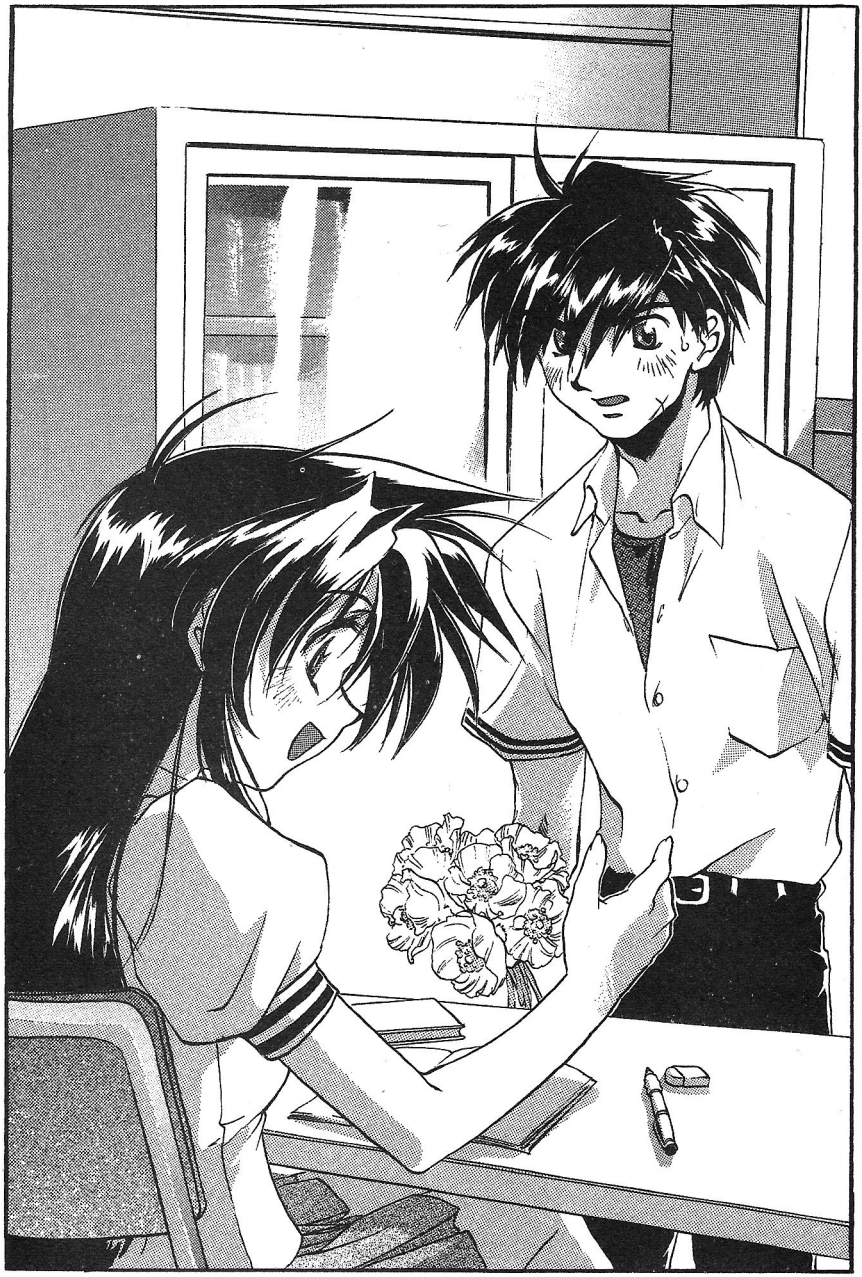
Resolutely, however, Sousuke held out a white bouquet of flowers, each about the size of a human fist.

"Huh?"

The six flowers gently opened into four petals, which tenderly concealed the round ovaries. Sousuke's limpid gesture entranced Kaname.

"I picked these last night. I want you to have them."

"Th-thanks," she stuttered, making a great effort to suppress the smile that threatened to escape. Perhaps she was being childish; maybe she ought to forgive him. "What kind of flowers are these? They're pretty."



"The flowers themselves aren't important. It would be better if the blossoms fell off right away."

"What?"

"They're poppies. When the petals fall off, you can cut the seed pods to make opium. Basically, these are the raw materials for heroin. If you sell that in the city, you should bring in an impressive amount."

Kaname stared dumbly. Her face, which almost had reached a state of calm, reverted to grim. The more she thought about it, the more she realized this war nut wouldn't have the common sense to give a bouquet to a girl in a bad mood.

"If I'm not mistaken," she sighed, "flowers like these grow only in the dangerous regions of Southeast and Central Asia."

"They also grow in a part of the Philippines," he said. "I picked them up while I was working."

"Working?" Kaname looked at Sousuke. "Come here."

Rising, she grabbed Sousuke and dragged him into the hall. After making sure no one was around, she whispered, "You were working for Mithril?"

"Yes. There was an urgent situation, so I went to the Philippines and came straight back," he recounted matter-of-factly. Kaname was the one classmate who knew about his real job.

She had learned about it two months earlier. Although Kaname gave off all appearances of a regular student, she was special, and a sly terrorist who knew about her hidden talents had kidnapped her. Fortunately, Sousuke had been attending her school as a pretense to protect her, and he had called in backup from Mithril.

The terrorists had targeted Kaname for the same reason Mithril singled her out for protection—and that reason was unknown to most people. All Sousuke and Kaname knew was that she was a special person called a "Whispered," and that she had some kind of secret, hidden knowledge.

Sousuke's job was to act as a guard while stationed in the sphere of her daily existence. Guarding her was an assignment that never bored him.

However, from time to time, Sousuke still traveled far and wide for missions or training. For this reason, Kaname wore a necklace with a built-in ultra-miniature transmitter, which she kept on at all times, even while bathing and sleeping. It was dubious, though, just how useful the thing actually was.

At first, Kaname was overwhelmed and suspicious about everything. As time passed, she got used to it all, though. She hadn't been bothered since the incident two months ago.

All she had to do was live her life . . . for now.

Understanding why Sousuke stood her up, Kaname sighed. "Darn it. If that's what happened, you should've told me!"

"My apologies. I was in a hurry."

"Well, I guess it turned out okay?"

"No delays. Kurz is back, too."

"That's good."

"Yes. I take it you're not going to do anything with these poppies?"

Kaname's fist flew, meeting Sousuke's jaw. The powerful hook sent him staggering backward.

"That's quite painful."

"Shut up!" she commanded. "Why do you have to do things like that? Don't you think you ought to have apologized *before* you handed me your dope? I don't care if you're a hotshot mercenary—there's still something seriously wrong with you!"

"Actually, I'm in excellent health."

"I'm talking about your brain! From the moment we met, you've been a complete idiot with no common sense! You've created a million times more problems than you've solved, and you never think about your actions at *all.* And I . . . argh!"

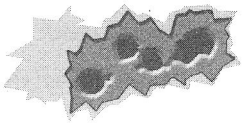
After removing her indoor shoes, Kaname repeatedly struck Sousuke in the face with them.

"Okay, okay. Stop. I think I understand what you're trying to say," he assured her.

"Oh yeah? Do you really? You understand delicacy and sincerity?"

"Yes. You mean to say that, in Tokyo, cocaine fetches a higher price than heroin. Say the word and I'll bring back some coca paste—"

Kaname delivered a high roundhouse kick to the nape of Sousuke's neck.



June 26, 13:10 (Japan Standard Time)
Outskirts of Sayama, Saitama Prefecture, Japan
Defense Agency Technological Research Center

On the other side of the two-way mirror, there was a dull interrogation room containing a table, a chair, and a young boy.

The boy sat in the chair, staring at the table. His small frame swam in a pair of purple pajamas. At first glance, he seemed to be about the same age as Tessa. He looked like an ordinary boy, yet there was something indefinably peculiar about him.

This particular boy was a member of the A21 terrorist organization, which had planned a bombing several years earlier—a worrisome background.

Tessa looked on from an adjacent observation room. Although the boy could not see her, Tessa wondered if he was somehow aware of her gaze.

"It's a complete coincidence that they detained him at Narita Airport," Kalinin explained from his position behind Tessa. "This boy passed himself off as a student returning from New Zealand, and he didn't go through a very stiff inspection at customs. It's not uncommon to go without even a cursory luggage check. If he hadn't begun to act strange all of a sudden, he would have passed through without a hitch."

"How did he act? What happened?"

"He leapt on a customs official, struck him, and attempted to strangle him," Kalinin reported.

"This boy did that?" Tessa asked incredulously. Although she could guess the reason why, she could not envision that boy flying into a fit of frenzy.

"Yes, ma'am. Due to his extremely agitated state after the arrest, they ordered a drug test. There was a Ti971 reaction in his blood—and seeing as that's a drug Mithril's always watching for, a series of people passed on word to us."

"That's why you've called me here?"

"Correct. He's been primed for the Lambda Driver. Whether it was successful . . . well, the only person who can determine that for sure is you, Colonel."

The Lambda Driver was a piece of equipment that acted according to the user's will. It could bend the laws of physics. Its nebulous Black Technology origin was leaps and bounds ahead of current scientific research.

On top of that, Tessa was perhaps the only person in the world who could comprehend Black Technology to some extent. Well, she *should* have been, at least: Suspicion held that someone had sold the technology to dangerous terrorists and dictatorships. It was entirely possible that the boy in custody had received special training and medication from that unknown person.

There were side effects from the training and drugs; already, the boy exhibited violent outbursts and memory defects.

"The Japanese government doesn't know how important he is. Naturally, they refused to turn him over to us, but that is largely for legal reasons."

"Right," Tessa concluded, flipping through a report detailing the boy's examination.

According to his passport, the boy's full name was Takuma Kugayama. It was unknown whether the name was real or assumed, though. The address and family on the document, however, definitely appeared to be fictitious.

"I read the detailed numbers earlier but found no contradictory elements. If he is what we fear he is, then there must be a weapon equipped with a Lambda Driver waiting for him somewhere."

Such a weapon would be impervious to conventional resistance. The terrorists might have a mech of unimaginable power.

"I'm also concerned that other members of A21 may be in this country," Kalinin said.

"Do you think we can get him to tell us?" Tessa hoped Takuma might reveal his comrades' whereabouts.

"He's kept his mouth shut so far. 'Advanced' interrogation is out of the question; because he's a prisoner of the Japanese government, we must treat him humanely."

Tessa took slight offense at Kalinin's candor. "It would be the same if he were our prisoner; I won't allow torture."

Then, without any warning, the boy on the other side of the mirror stepped across the table and sprung toward Tessa.

"Ahhh!" screamed Takuma as he smacked into the mirror before staggering backward.



Although she knew she was completely safe, the impact startled Tessa, and she fell onto her behind, dropping the report.

Perhaps unaware of the activity's futility, Takuma bared his teeth and charged the mirror several more times. Transforming into a different person—a different animal—he battered the mirror and howled.

Guards hustled into the interrogation room and struggled to pin him down.

"Are you okay, Colonel?"

"I'm fine, just a little startled." Tessa accepted Kalinin's outstretched hand and stood. After her heartbeat returned to normal, she picked up the documents with some help from Kalinin.

"He seemed quite intent on strangling you," Kalinin pointed out in an ill-conceived attempt to lighten the mood.

"Anyway, if we do a full-blown test, we'll have to measure the reaction with a handheld NILS," commented Tessa. "If I had to guess . . . he's probably guilty."

"Can we interview him?"

"I'll do it," volunteered Tessa as she bent under the desk to get the last pages of the scattered report. "One on one could be problematic—augh!" Tessa bumped her head on the corner of the desk. It hurt enough to make her dizzy.

"Ow!" She tottered backward.

Kalinin rushed to support her. "Colonel!"

"I . . . I'm okay. It's only a little bump," she stated with tears in her eyes, keenly aware of her innate clumsiness. When the heavens had graced Tessa with beauty and brains, they had compensated with poor coordination.

"Shall we go, then?" suggested Kalinin. "Staying here won't help us."

"Right."

Tessa and Kalinin exited the observation room and found Corporal Yang, her guard, waiting in the hallway. Shimamura was in front of the interrogation room door, discussing something with Takuma's attending physician.

The conversation ended, and Shimamura approached. "I'm sorry. They had to give him a sedative. Your interview will have to wait until this evening."

Exactly as I expected, thought Tessa, discouraged.

"I understand," she said. "No offense, but how tight is the security around here?"

"Flawless. Nobody could get in. Why?"

"I suspect there will be intruders."

Shimamura looked at her with the disdain professionals sometimes show toward amateurs. "Never! You think that terror group will come to rescue him? He's nothing more than a young dope fiend going through withdrawal! I don't know why that interests you Mithril folks; frankly, I think we ought to send him back to a police hospital right now."

"It's not that simple. This boy may be extremely significant, and—"

Shimamura cut her off with a wave of his hand. "This research facility is far more important than that boy. Security is tight. There are always two platoons—sixty men total—on patrol in shifts. And another thing: It's privileged information that the boy is here, in this depart—"

The sound of a giant, mechanical cannon firing shook the air, interrupting his rant. Then, there was the distinct sound of crunching metal and an explosion.

Tessa looked out the window. Flames and smoke rose from the vicinity of the hospital building on the facility's farthest corner. One of the guard vehicles smoldered, apparently having exploded.

Then, there was the unmistakable sound of intermittent, small-arms fire: *Taktak! Tatatak!* People shouted and screamed for help.

"What's going on?"

The facility was under attack. Had A2I come for Takuma?

"Colonel, please move away from the window," Kalinin requested, tugging on Tessa's arm. He had his pistol out.

Corporal Yang surveyed the situation, briskly moving down the hallway.

"They're coming for Takuma," Tessa said, heading toward the interrogation room. "We must move him."

"I cannot support that, Colonel," Kalinin opposed.

"Why not?"

"We're outsiders. We should hide here and wait for the enemy to come for him."

Tessa knew Kalinin's suggestion was not borne of cowardice, rather his prudence and desire to avoid unnecessary danger whenever possible. Regardless, she shook her head. "We can't let A2I have Takuma. If they'll go to this much trouble to get him back, then they must not have a replacement for him. I'm certain they're planning to get him in the seat of some dreadful mech. It would prove dangerous to let them have him."

"Yang and I have our hands full protecting you. And the enemy—"

"W-wait a minute," protested Shimamura, finally over his initial shock. "You're not in charge here! I can't let you take the boy."

"If your people can't protect him, then we don't have a choice," Tessa countered.

"I told you that our guards are professionals—substantially equipped professionals. No matter how many attackers there are, we'll eliminate them."

Then, as if to prove Shimamura's point, an armored vehicle with a twenty-millimeter automatic cannon passed in front of the building.

"See? Their guns can't compete with that armor!"

"We should stand back," mumbled Kalinin, right before a white bolt of fire pierced the armored vehicle.

Metal fragments shot in all directions, and the vehicle skidded for a moment, spewing smoke. Then, it exploded, shattering the window next to Tessa with bits of shrapnel.

The force responsible for destroying the armored vehicle appeared from behind the hospital building: A giant humanoid shape emerged through the flames. The egg-shaped torso and lanky limbs identified the culprit as a second-generation, Soviet-made AS: the Rk-92 Savage. It had a forty-millimeter rifle in its hands.

"An Arm Slave? Impossible!" Shimamura yelped.

His surprise was warranted. One expected to see an AS in war-torn countries, not in peaceful Japan! Finding one here was about as likely as finding a giant cheeseburger on the menu at an elegant Japanese restaurant.

"Preposterous," declared Tessa.

The gray Savage walked toward their building, strafing guards with its head-mounted machine guns. Periodically, it fired rifle rounds into buildings. The agonizing cries of dying men reached Tessa's ears.

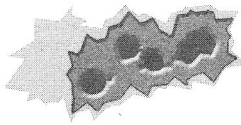
The mech's round red eyes looked toward them. Although it was an inhuman gaze, Tessa got the impression that the AS was smirking. It aimed its machine guns and its large rifle at them. And then, it fired.

"Colonel!"

Simultaneously, Kalinin and Yang rushed toward Tessa. Shimamura scampered into the corner.

Before they had time to tell Tessa to get down, the blast hit. The ceiling collapsed. Glass, rebar, and concrete flew in every direction. For a moment, there was no sound as each and every fragment revolved in slow motion.

Tessa could see Corporal Yang diving toward her, toward the glass shards that pierced his skin. As Tessa fell to the ground, she wished Yang hadn't gone to such extremes. Then, right away, another impact hammered her.



The Savage had control of the building and the immediate surroundings. There was no sign of more guards. They all had run, had died, or were in the process of dying.

Stepping through the dust and smoke, the Savage approached the half-destroyed building. Trampling over the rubble, the mech extended an arm into the collapsed wall. Locking all its joints, the Savage froze in place.

The hatch behind the head opened, and a woman in an orange anti-G suit appeared. She appeared to be completely indifferent to the destructive calamity she had wrought moments ago.

The woman, Seina, pulled out a submachine gun from the hatch before striding gracefully down the Savage's arm into the building.

She walked through the debris-littered hallway, nonchalantly stepping over a piece of flesh belonging to a victim of the Savage's guns.

Finding her target—the interrogation room holding Takuma—Seina opened the door. But there was nothing in the room except a toppled chair and a simple table.

Speechless, she felt a flash of emotion.

"Hey, where's Takuma?" asked a masked man, a member of her attack team.

"Not here," she answered.

"Impossible. The transmitter signal indicates he should be in this room."

"They moved him."

She pointed to the room's entrance, where droplets of blood indicated that a wounded person had escorted Takuma out. How could they move so quickly, without the attack group noticing?

"We can track the transmitter, right?" Seina asked.

"We can, within the reception range. It'll take some time to locate him, though."

"Then, start looking for him—*immediately.* Takuma's absolutely necessary for moving the demon."

Nodding, the man said, "Also, we have a man down here. What should we do?"

"Kill the guards," she said coldly.

"I know, but . . ." the masked man stepped aside so she could see the wounded man her comrades carried toward her.

He was a large Caucasian with a mangled brown suit. Several glass fragments pierced his back, and he bled from a multitude of wounds. It would not be surprising if these injuries proved fatal. Although the men dragged him face down, he still seemed to be conscious.

"He doesn't appear to be part of this research facility," the masked man finally concluded.

"No, he doesn't."

"What do we do, Seina?"

Instead of answering, Seina lifted the man's head with her submachine gun. He had chiseled features and a gray beard. His dark eyes revealed a strong will to live, despite the serious injuries.

Instinctually, Seina knew that the man was a professional fighter. His face reminded her of someone from long ago—someone she almost had trusted.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Your enemy," the man said before passing out.



CHAPTER 2
The Baton Passes to Urzu Seven

June 26, 18:31 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Tamagawa-cho

As evening fell on the residential area of town, Kaname Chidori walked home from the train station. Sousuke Sagara followed her, keeping five full steps behind. Finally, she ground to a halt in front of a vegetable shop.

"How long are you going to follow me?" she demanded. "There's no reason for you to be a stalker-esque bodyguard anymore, so you can quit the part where you shadow me and annoy me to death."

"My place happens to be in this direction," Sousuke explained.

His apartment truly was a minute's walk away from Kaname's. He still lived in the apartment Mithril had set up to enable him to guard her.

"I . . . I knew that," Kaname said, a little out of joint to hear that he wasn't actually following her. She started walking again.

Sousuke knew enough to be scared of Kaname's persistent stubbornness. Following her, he asked, "Can I say something?"

"What?"

"I don't know what I have to do to help you understand. I told you why I broke the promise, and I gave you flowers to emphasize the sincerity of my apology. For the sake of ongoing security, it would be in our best interest to mend our relationship."

Those were the only terms in which Sousuke could voice this wish, and it caused Kaname enormous irritation.

"'Mend our relationship'?" she fumed. "What relationship? We're classmates. Beyond that, I don't see any reason why we ever need to talk to each other!"

"I have a responsibility to protect you," he stated.

He's so self-righteous, she thought, *as if he's so important.*

"Who do you think you are, Kevin Costner?" she asked bitterly. "You're a useless nuisance, and I never asked for your protection."

"It's true we didn't seek your consent. However—"

"However *what?* I have some weird power, and bad guys will try to get me, right? What happens to me still doesn't have anything to do with you!"

"Wrong. If something were to happen to you—"

"Drop the 'bodyguard' bit!" Kaname hollered at a volume that made everyone else on the street stop and take note. "I get it. Your job is the top priority, right? Of course it is. Duty always comes first for you war freaks. That's fine, but you can at least do your nutso self-destruction crap somewhere I don't have to see it!

"In other words," she ranted, never giving Sousuke a chance to speak, "that's the extent of our relationship. I mean, if you die on one of your stupid missions, I'd probably light a stick of incense for you. And if I ever get a boyfriend, I'll be sure to tell him about the crazy fool from my class, and we'll both laugh—all for you. Happy?"

By the time Kaname stopped shouting, her shoulders were heaving and she was completely winded. When she had cooled off, Sousuke was not angry, merely agape.

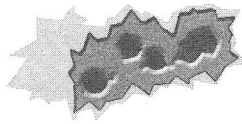
"Whatever happens to you . . . I don't really care," Kaname concluded, turning her back on Sousuke.

Crossing the street, she ran to the entrance of her apartment building. She jumped through the closing doors of the elevator and groaned.

"I'm such . . . an idiot," she determined, thunking her forehead against the wall of the elevator as it ascended.

She should cut him some slack for trying to say he was sorry, albeit in his own dysfunctional way.

Why can't I be honest with him?



June 26, 18:40 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Tigers Apartments

Sousuke carted his agony toward his apartment.

No matter how he tried, he could not understand Kaname. She said she hated him, she couldn't care less if he died, and she didn't want him around. *It seems to be a contradiction.* Kaname constantly helped Sousuke study, occasionally made lunch for him, and even helped him clean up some of the mistakes he made at school. Weren't these demonstrations of goodwill?

He supposed she still might be angry over his absence the previous night, but he'd offered an explanation and an apology. Why hadn't she forgiven him? *I wonder if she hates me after all.* Maybe her usual acts of kindness were nothing more than her way of thanking him for guarding her.

As he entertained these thoughts, heaviness struck him from the back of his head to his shoulders. Sousuke recalled the other times he'd felt this way: when surrounded by opposition forces with radio reports that there would be no reinforcements; whenever a helicopter pilot shouted that they were running out of fuel on the way back from a mission; and whenever Kurz said, "Don't worry." In other words, it was a very bad feeling.

Although Sousuke normally was indifferent to personal relationships, his association with Kaname was an enigma that continued to baffle him.

"Ha ha! That's love, dude!" Kurz once told him. "You're done for!"

Immediately, Sousuke regretted ever discussing it with Kurz. Theoretically, love was very pleasant; so, given the severity of his current misery, Sousuke clearly was not in love.

Mired in thought, he trudged down the fifth floor hallway to his own apartment. At the door, he realized someone was inside—maybe two someones.

No matter what occupied his mind, Sousuke retained his soldier's instincts. He pushed emotional distress aside into a far corner of his brain and pulled a nine-millimeter handgun from a holster behind his back.

The door wasn't locked. Did the intruders use the spare key in the mailbox? If so, it wasn't Kurz or Mao—they had their own keys. *So, who is it?*

There was no evidence of an ambush.

Taking a deep breath, Sousuke resolutely opened the door and charged in. He kept low, like a snake sneaking up on its prey. Then, he sprung into the living room, leveling his gun at the two inhabitants.

There was a thin boy, whom Sousuke didn't know. He was clad in pajamas.

The other person in the room was a girl in a dirty suit. She had ash blonde hair and pale eyes, and she gripped a large automatic handgun in her slender fingers.

Although she was both surprised and frightened, when she saw Sousuke's face, the girl breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Oh, Mister Sagara! Thank goodness it's you!"

Sousuke's eyes bugged out. "Colonel?"

Relieved, Colonel Teletha Testarossa lowered her gun and relaxed against the wall. "If you were an enemy," she squeaked, "I would've been done for. I'm . . . not good with guns."

"What's going on? Who is this guy?"

"We can't let him escape. He's . . . well . . ."

When Sousuke's eyes met the boy's, he detected a powerful malaise in his stare. What was he looking at?

A moment later, Sousuke felt a doubt, and the boy suddenly rose and stepped forward. Instinctively, Sousuke pointed his gun at him.

"Ooh! Ahhh!" The boy yelled and leapt.

Rather than using his gun, Sousuke bent over and quickly delivered a shoulder throw. The boy landed on his back, which knocked the wind out of him. Sousuke struck him in the solar plexus with the handle of his gun.

"Gah!" The boy blacked out.

What's his problem? Sousuke wondered nonchalantly during the whole fight.

"That was a close one," decreed Tessa. "The sedative must've worn off."

After handcuffing the boy, Sousuke threw him into the bedroom, where he retrieved a chair, offering it to Tessa. There wasn't much furniture in his apartment, let alone a sofa.

Sousuke did not know exactly why Tessa was the supreme commander of the Tuatha de Danaan amphibious assault force, but he (along with every other member of the force) recognized that she

was intelligent and capable enough to fulfill the hefty responsibility. Consequently, he often felt tense while talking to her.

Piloting an AS was child's play compared to shouldering the well being of several hundred people. In Sousuke's estimation, Teletha Testarossa was from another dimension.

When Sousuke asked if she wanted coffee, Tessa replied, "Please."

He saluted her and headed for the kitchen. Ten minutes later, Sousuke was abreast of the situation. Although he understood, he was surprised. To attack a government research center with an AS just to extract one person seemed reckless to Sousuke, comparable to performing an appendectomy with a chainsaw. The attackers must be accustomed to doing things the hard way.

Tessa recounted how she had lost sight of Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, and how she and Corporal Yang had escaped with Takuma.

"So you borrowed a car from the research center and escaped?" Sousuke asked, keeping one eye on the percolating coffee pot.

"Yes," she affirmed. "Considering they had an AS, it would've been dangerous to call a helicopter. Our transmitter was broken, anyway. Mister Yang insisted on driving, despite being wounded."

"All the way here?"

"No. We were going to come here, but Mister Yang took a turn for the worse on the way. He pushed himself too hard. It couldn't be helped, so I left him in the Higashikurume area and called an ambulance with a public telephone. Then, I got a taxi and left."

She's a cautious person after all, Sousuke decided.

Although the intelligence bureau wanted to establish a Tokyo branch in the future, Mithril didn't have any permanent bases in Tokyo yet. In other words, the only place in the country Tessa knew would be safe was Sousuke's apartment. She couldn't count on Japanese police. The research center was supposed to be classified, yet it had been attacked. No matter where she went, she wouldn't have felt secure.

"I changed taxis twice before coming here. Melissa once told me where you kept the spare key."

Master Sergeant Melissa Mao had a closer personal relationship to Tessa than Sousuke did. The two women had a lot in common, both hailing from the American east coast. Apparently, at some point, Mao had told Tessa how to get into the apartment. *I wonder if they've talked about me,* Sousuke pondered.

"What's so special about Takuma?" Sousuke asked.

"I'm sorry," Tessa said, "you're not cleared to know that."

"I see. I beg your pardon." Although he had been shot down, Sousuke wasn't upset. As part of Mithril, it was not uncommon to be denied information.

"The only thing you need to know," warned Tessa, "is that this terrorist group is not scared to go to extremes. If they get Takuma back, something terrible certainly will occur."

Sousuke poured coffee into a mug, returned to the living room, and presented it to Tessa.

"Thanks, Mister Sagara."

"It's no trouble. It's very cheap coffee."

Brushing off his comment, Tessa said, "No wonder I'm so exhausted. I got into a staring match with Takuma that lasted two hours before you got here. I didn't know your personal code to start up your transmitter."

"Sorry. You think Yang's going to make it?" inquired Sousuke. He recalled Yang's face; he was an excellent man, but too kindhearted for his own good.

"Yes. No apparent damage to the vital organs. He simply lost a lot of blood and passed out." She paused to take a dainty sip of coffee. "I'm completely useless on land. If I weren't so slow, Mister Kalinin wouldn't be . . . I don't know how to apologize. He might as well have been your father."

"Not necessary, ma'am. The lieutenant commander was doing his job. Also, there is no proof he actually did die in action."

"That's true."

"He still could be alive, potentially."

"But—" Tessa protested.

"When the lieutenant commander and I first met, we were enemies. Let me say that I never have fought against anyone as tough as him."

Although Sousuke meant for this to assuage Tessa, it actually made her quite anxious.

"Enemies?"

"That was a long time ago," Sousuke explained. "During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, I encountered him in the Panjshir Valley."

Sousuke used to be an Afghan guerilla, whereas Kalinin was a commander in the Soviet special forces, called "Spetsnaz." Naturally, during Afghanistan's civil war, they met as opposing forces.

"Even on my home turf, so to speak, he defeated me. It would be extremely difficult to kill Kalinin."

"That's an odd consolation; however, I believe you. I'll think of Mister Kalinin as safe." She smiled feebly. Then, she suddenly realized that Sousuke still was standing at attention. "Please sit

down, Mister Sagara. There's no need for ceremony in your own apartment."

"Actually, ma'am, this is a Mithril safe house."

"You live here, right?"

"Yes, but Mithril pays for it."

Tessa laughed out loud. "Melissa wasn't kidding."

"Excuse me?"

"She said you were too serious and rigid but, ultimately, a good person. Her descriptions fits to a tee the way you 'cheered me up' about Mister Kalinin."

"Yes. No. I mean . . ." Sousuke wasn't sure how to respond, and looking down into Tessa's mischievous gray eyes didn't help matters.

"Did you know that you and I are the same age?" she asked.

"Yes, I had heard that."

"If we walked hand in hand, we'd probably look like lovers."

"Yes. I mean . . . it would be an honor," he stammered.

Professionally, he probably should have said that he was not suitable to be her match, but his response didn't seem to kill Tessa's high spirits.

With a charming but reserved smile, Tessa replied, "It would be an honor for me, too. All joking aside, you should be more at



ease during times like this. If you're always so uptight, it could be a problem for me."

"Understood, ma'am."

"That wasn't an order."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded. "Was it a request, then?"

"Something like that. Maybe you could just consider it a 'favor for a friend.'"

"Aye! As you wish, ma'am."

An expression of simultaneous amusement and sadness took over Tessa's face. "I have another favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"May I use your bathroom? I'm a complete mess, as you can see." As evidence, she pinched her dirty blouse and disarrayed braid.

"Huh?"

"I'd like to take a shower. May I?"

"Feel free," granted the dumbstruck Sousuke. "In the meantime, should I contact the de Danaan?"

"Please do. It's probably submerged right now. Send word for it to rise to periscope depth, via the Merida Island base ELF signal. My identification code this week is 'Man from Nantucket.' I will talk to them directly once the ship surfaces and establishes a secure channel."

After these instructions, Tessa headed for the bathroom.

At times like this, my excellent hearing is a nuisance, Sousuke thought. He could hear the sound of clothes rustling in the changing room. *Plap, plap!* She tossed her clothes into the washing machine. Then, there was a softer rustling, a slipping sound, as something slid off her legs. *Kachik.* The bathroom door opened and closed.

Sousuke wasn't straining to hear, and he was trying his best not to imagine the colonel without clothes on. Nonetheless, he couldn't settle down. Logically, he knew that Teletha Testarossa, who he always imagined to be some kind of superhuman, bathed like everyone else. The civilian clothes were not part of her body, after all. Yet for some reason, Sousuke felt the same kind of nervousness he would if there were a ticking time bomb in the bathroom.

The job . . . Shaking his head, Sousuke contacted the Tuatha de Danaan using the satellite communicator in his apartment. Regular radio waves couldn't reach the depths of the Pacific, making direct conversation impossible. Rather, Sousuke sent a short telegraph via ELF through Mithril's West Pacific base. Two minutes later, a reply came.

"Roger. Will re-contact you at ten hundred twenty hours, Greenwich Mean Time, on circuit G3."

That was in twenty minutes. Sousuke turned off the communicator.

Once they had made contact, reinforcements would come from the de Danaan or the West Pacific base. Then, they could move Takuma to a safe place where their enemies couldn't get to him. Thus, Sousuke would have to protect Tessa and Takuma only until that help arrived.

Sousuke peeked in at Takuma in the bedroom.

Already conscious, Takuma paid no attention to the handcuffs chaining him to the modest bed. He stared calmly at Sousuke.

"Are you hungry?" Sousuke asked, mostly as a test.

"No," Takuma answered, unexpectedly clearly.

"So, you are able to communicate."

"Of course I am, Mister Sousuke Sagara." Takuma smiled slightly. Perhaps he had seen the nameplate when he entered the apartment. He meant to reveal that knowledge as a challenge, however.

"You seem like a smart guy," Sousuke decided before returning to the living room, where he turned on the TV and began methodically cleaning his weapons.

The news came on, but there was no report on the attack at the research center. The Japanese government seemed intent on keeping it under wraps—perhaps because there was a terrorist group running around with an AS.

Maybe we should get out of here, thought Sousuke while he inspected a silenced submachine gun. Although the group probably didn't know about this apartment, that was no reason to relax.

Sousuke was in the process of using a quick loader to fill a magazine with nine-millimeter rounds when the doorbell rang.

Suspiciously, he picked up the submachine gun and a bulletproof vest before going to the door. As a precaution, he held the vest like a shield as he looked through the peephole.

The fisheye lens showed Kaname's face, bent and distorted. She wasn't wearing her school uniform now and seemed fidgety and unsettled.

Confused, Sousuke opened the door.

"Chidori," he acknowledged. "What's up?"

"Why are you holding that gun?"

"Work stuff," he said cryptically. "Did you see anybody suspicious?"

"No, of course not! Anyway, um . . ." For once, Kaname struggled for words. She toed the floor for a moment. "I think I said too much earlier. I mean, it isn't like you were out having fun, Sousuke. I should've known that all along. I just have a stubborn side. I guess what I'm trying to say . . ."

She gulped. "I'm sorry." She hung her head for a moment and then gazed up at Sousuke expectantly. She looked very concerned that he might spurn her.

Thank goodness this issue's resolved, thought Sousuke. The oppressive feeling from earlier vanished like smoke in the wind. He'd been wrong to think Kaname bore ill will toward him. "It's okay," he said. "I cause you way too many problems for you to apologize to me."

"You forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he said plainly. "It was my fault all along."

"Really? Thanks!" Kaname's face suddenly grew cheerful, and she pulled a bundle of boxes out from behind her back. "Also, I have some side dishes left over from yesterday. Want some? If you let me use your kitchen, I can heat them up really fast and we'll have a whole meal."

"Actually . . ." Sousuke's brain raced. Tessa and Takuma were both inside. And currently, Tessa was in his shower.

Even though he theoretically hadn't done anything wrong, Sousuke succumbed to feelings of severe guilt.

"Did you eat already?" Kaname asked anxiously.

"No, not yet." He couldn't lie.

"Then, let's eat together. Can I come in?"

Sousuke blocked her entrance.

"What's the matter?"

"Thanks for your thoughtfulness," Sousuke began.

"Huh?"

"I'm in the middle of an extremely complicated situation here, though," he continued. "It would take a long time to explain it, and I'm not entirely confident you would understand, anyway."

"What are you babbling about?"

At that moment, the door to the bathroom, which was right next to the entryway, opened. Wearing only a bath towel, Tessa leaned into the hallway. Drops of water fell from her wet hair onto the floor.

"Mister Sagara, do you have a T-shirt or something I could—" her eyes met Kaname's. "Oh."

For a very long three seconds, neither of them moved. Standing between them, Sousuke began to sweat nervously. He looked back and forth, sensing that this was definitely not good. In fact, it was extremely bad.

"Hello," Tessa finally said, somewhat awkwardly. For some reason, she seemed bashful, the way a heroine of a foreign film acts after a love scene.

"Ah. Hello," Kaname replied in a dull voice. Still shocked, she shoved the boxes of food at Sousuke. "Hope you two enjoy these."

"Ch-Chidori."

"Sorry to disturb you. Your girlfriend is really cute." Kaname turned and stumbled down the hallway.

Determining the situation was more of a disaster than he'd originally thought, Sousuke started after her.

"I told you to quit following me," she said in a voice so cold it froze Sousuke in his tracks.

"Chidori, it's all a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"She's my superior officer—a colonel in Mithril. She's the captain of an amphibious assault submarine. She outranks me by far." It he hadn't been so riled up, Sousuke probably would have spared Kaname this gibberish.

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Not at all."

Kaname stopped, her shoulders shaking. Although Sousuke couldn't see her expression from behind, he guessed she was pretty angry.

"Sorry," she said, surprising him. "Here I am, butting in. I didn't know. I guess I've been nothing but a nuisance this whole time."

"No, Chidori, that's not true at all."

"Forget it. Don't try so hard—I'm not angry, just sorry. I'll be careful from now on—"

"Chidori."

"Anyway, I'm sorry," she repeated before bolting for the emergency stairwell.

I can't blame the colonel—she wouldn't be here if it weren't for the terrorists, Sousuke thought. *If I ever come across these A21 people, I will plug them with every last bullet I have.*

Tessa contacted the Tuatha de Danaan using the satellite communicator. Likely, she spoke to Commander Richard Mardukas, the executive officer.

Because she had no change of clothes, Tessa wore only a plain T-shirt—a very seductive-looking outfit. It was the first time Sousuke had seen her slender, bare feet with their dainty little toes. Sousuke caught periodic glimpses of her bosom through the shirt's collar, leaving him at a loss as to which way to look.

Even Sousuke, who acted like a stump with limbs in the presence of girls, understood that Tessa was very attractive. He didn't understand her defenselessness, though. She befuddled Sousuke in an entirely different way than Kaname did.

Before long, her conversation ended, and she turned off the communicator.

"What's the situation?"

"Support is on the way—Melissa and Mister Weber," she said, meaning Mao and Kurz. "They're bringing an M9 to transport Takuma to the de Danaan. After that, you all have a job to do."

"Meaning?"

"Recon. We need you to find the enemy base. I have the de Danaan's mother AI monitoring the police and military channels; hopefully, we'll have some clues by tomorrow morning. Once we have more info, we'll decide whether to let them go or bring them under control."

"What about you, Colonel?"

"I'll stay here in Tokyo, because I'm the only one who knows how to handle the special equipment the enemy probably has."

Correctly, Sousuke assumed that she would not tell him what the "special equipment" was. He didn't bother to ask.

"That means we'll just have to sit tight and wait for now," said Tessa as she sat down. "So, that was Kaname Chidori, huh?"

"What?" Sousuke grunted, slightly alarmed to hear this question out of nowhere.

"That was Kaname Chidori, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You seem to get along well."

"No, ma'am," he responded after a pause. "Not that well."

"Really? That's not how it looked to me. She made you dinner and brought it over here—that's something a wife would do."

"I apologize," Sousuke said. "I'll be more careful not to mix personal and business affairs from now on."

"That's not what I meant." Tessa smiled. "When I approved you to guard Miss Chidori, I didn't expect you to grow so close to her."

Sousuke recalled Lieutenant Kalinin giving him the assignment, but it made sense that Tessa knew about it.

She continued, "I couldn't help wondering . . . whether there are any girls interested in you." Periodically, while she spoke, Tessa's voice came out shrouded in mystery, as if she were searching for something.

Unsure how to respond, Sousuke said nothing.

"So, she's your girlfriend, then?"

"No, it's not that kind of relationship."

"Really?"

"No, ma'am," he stated. "In fact, it's taking an inordinate amount of time to establish mutual trust."

"Oh, good." Tessa clasped her hands and grinned.

Relieved that his superior somehow understood, Sousuke was about to salute when his thoughts interrupted: *Wait a minute. What does she mean by 'good'? Why is she happy my relationship with Kaname isn't going well?*

In her grinning face, Sousuke found no trace of malice.

I don't get it at all. I mean, she's the commander of the Tuatha de Danaan. Maybe it's something an NCO wouldn't understand.

Sousuke changed the subject. "Now, I understand that Takuma is very important, but how much firepower does this A2I group have?"

After an instant of disappointment, Tessa pulled herself together and said, "We don't know, exactly. We do know, however, that their equipment is very advanced, and we estimate they are very well trained."

"And their intelligence potential?"

"Also unknown. There is a chance they have a plant in the Japanese government, though."

"Should we interrogate Takuma?"

"I considered that," Tessa declared, "but he probably wouldn't cooperate, and I don't want to resort to violence. Let's wait a bit longer and then decide."

"Yes—" Sousuke cut himself off and his face grew sharp and grim. "I think we might need to relocate."

He grabbed a submachine gun and stuffed a couple of spare magazines in his belt.

"What's the matter?" Tessa asked.

"Go to the kitchen and stay low, please."

"Stay low, please" was all Tessa needed to hear to understand. She didn't bother trying to help; she knew she would only get in the way.

"Be careful," she requested simply before heading for the kitchen.

The bell rang. Sousuke knew it was not Kaname. He pressed the button on the living room's intercom.

"Delivery!"

"I'll be right there," replied Sousuke, although he had no intention of moving.

Instead, he closed his eyes, put a finger on the light switch, and took a deep breath. There was a sense of tension; he could almost smell the murderous intentions in the air. *It's good to be back where I belong,* he thought.

About ten seconds passed.

Then, breaking the silence, a hand grenade crashed through the window facing the verandah. Less than a second later, tear gas spewed

from the grenade, and a man in a black combat uniform and gas mask flew through the window. He was armed.

Seeing what he'd been waiting for, Sousuke flipped off the lights, aimed at the man, and fired.

The darkness took the intruder by surprise. After the burst of gunfire, the man collapsed, and the room was silent again.

There will be more . . . in the next room.

Walking defiantly through the tear gas effluvium, Sousuke went to the bedroom. Wasting no time, he faced Takuma and told him to get down.

Instantly, he turned to the window behind him, emptying the rest of his magazine. Glass shards and sparks flew in every direction. There was a short scream, followed by the sound of someone collapsing on the verandah.

While Sousuke deftly changed the gun's magazine, he heard the sound of a small explosion in the entryway—a sound Sousuke easily identified as the door being blown off its hinges.

Somebody kicked in the door and stepped inside.

Even through the dark fog of the tear gas, Sousuke could make out a delivery man wearing a gas mask. Apparently, he had come to deliver some bullets, because he held a large automatic pistol.

"Throw down your weapon," Sousuke warned compassionately, but the man ignored him, choosing to aim the gun at Sousuke.

Without hesitation, Sousuke pulled his trigger. The muzzle flash swirled through the tear gas.

After taking five bullets, the "delivery man" collapsed.

Upon checking all the rooms and the hallway, Sousuke found no evidence of more assailants. *Only three?*

They had tried to implement a pincer attack, but their sub-par tricks didn't measure up. Sousuke assessed that they were adequately trained but not exceptionally skilled.

Coughing violently, Tessa switched on the kitchen fan.

She's not trained for tear gas bombs, Sousuke realized. *It's got to be tough for her.*

"It's safe now, Colonel."

She hacked a few more times. "Y-yes."

She probably wouldn't be able to speak well for a while. Sousuke walked over to the crumpled man in the living room. Although the man wore a bulletproof vest, Sousuke shot him in the neck and face.

For a fleeting moment, Sousuke felt something that bordered on pity. Then, he remembered that these people had killed a number of

the research center's guards and staff. It was not unfair for this man to meet the same fate. Although it sounded trite, they lived in a "kill or be killed" world.

Sousuke determined that the attacker had used a rope to rappel from the roof onto the porch. His submachine gun, which he never had the opportunity to fire, contained special anti-terrorist combat rounds. The gun and the bullets were not purchased easily from thugs on the street.

Sousuke pulled off the man's gas mask and looked at his face: He was a young Japanese man, close to Sousuke's age. His vacant eyes stared at Sousuke with a look of permanent surprise.

Sousuke examined the other corpses. They were both about twenty years old, probably Japanese.

Sousuke wondered what kind of group A21 was. They didn't seem to be politically motivated and, when he had looked at the photos for his previous mission, he'd seen that almost all of its members were young men like this.

Finally regaining some of her poise, Tessa came out of the kitchen. Devoid of all color, she went to the bedroom window and peered at the dead man on the verandah.

"I wonder how they found us," she said.

"It's not likely they followed you, because they would have had plenty of opportunities to attack you and Takuma before you got here."

"True," she conceded. "And I don't like to think that there's a mole in Mithril. Perhaps we underestimated their intelligence network. The only other thing I could think of is . . . is . . ."

"Colonel?"

"I'm sorry," she gasped, clinging to Sousuke. Her shoulders shook, and she periodically choked out little puffs of air. He slender fingers clutched Sousuke's shirt.

"It's just, seeing something like this . . . now, I understand. I'm not competent to think about *anything.* Until a few moments ago, my mind was on something else."

She pressed her head against Sousuke's chest.

Sousuke didn't realize that "something else" meant him. When Sousuke dealt with girls his age—when he was exposed to their feelings—this was how it always turned out. Inevitably, they caught a glimpse of the world he lived in and burst emotionally.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Tessa blubbered, desperately trying to curtail her sobs.

Unsure what to do, Sousuke stood still.

The scene's only witness, Takuma, chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he laughed. "I don't think you have time to waste on tears, though."

"What do you mean?" Sousuke asked, gently disengaging himself from Tessa.

"You'll soon share their fate," Takuma spat, indicating his comrades. "As long as you have me, my people will track you down."

"You must be quite important."

"Very. It'll save you a big headache if you release me now. I'm telling you this out of kindness."

"There's another way to settle this," Sousuke threatened, thrusting his gun against Takuma's temple. After all, that would be the simplest way to send Takuma somewhere the enemy couldn't get him back.

"You'd kill me?"

"As you've seen, I'm quite capable of killing if I have to."

"No, Mister Sagara," Tessa pleaded with regained composure. "You mustn't."

"May I ask why?"

"It would be the most logical and secure route, but we can't go about it that way," she said as though trying to convince herself.

"If we were to kill him, we would be no better than them. Our organization would lose all meaning."

Sousuke didn't move. He simply stared at his gun pressed against Takuma's head. Although Takuma seemed arrogant, Sousuke detected a slight hint of fear, imperceptible to someone who wasn't looking for it.

"You think I'm naïve, don't you, Mister Sagara?" inquired Tessa.

"No, ma'am." He lowered his gun. He addressed Takuma: "You can thank her."

Takuma watched Sousuke turn away. "What, am I supposed to be grateful?"

"No, that's not why I stopped him," Tessa explained.

"Overblown self-importance, then," Takuma decided. "I suppose that's how you keep a position of power."

"It's fine with me if that's what you think," she responded halfheartedly, following Sousuke into the living room. "Thanks again, Mister Sagara."

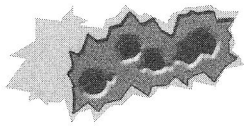
"Think nothing of it. We have to assume that more will come."

"True. We should get out of here."

"I'll dispose of the bodies, if you'll contact the Tuatha de Danaan. Tell them we're headed for . . ." Sousuke thought for a moment. "Tell them we're going to study Japanese history."

"Japanese history?"

"Sergeant Weber will know what I mean."



June 26, 20:31 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Maison K

Staring absentmindedly at the ceiling, Kaname stretched out on the sofa.

At first, she felt like crying, but that quickly gave way to an oppressive sense of ennui.

It was a shock, for sure. Sousuke was always so brusque and inflexible, Kaname hadn't considered the possibility that any other girl would tolerate him. *But he has a girlfriend like her. I was a fool,* she thought.

Perhaps because she had faced death with Sousuke, Kaname had taken special notice of him and tried to look after him somewhat. She had thought she was the only one who understood the good in him, a

thought that had made her selfishly cheerful. How arrogant was she? Surely, he found her repulsive.

She picked up a nearby handheld mirror and examined her reflection. *I'm so ugly,* she decided, *at least, in comparison to his girlfriend. She's so cute. Compared to her . . .*

Kaname thought about the girl's sparkling silver hair and huge gray eyes. She recalled the elfin smile reminiscent of a figure skater's. Kaname could never make that kind of impression on anyone.

Any way she considered it, they had been doing *something.* Sousuke was probably with *her* when he didn't show up at Kaname's the previous night—merely using work as an excuse. He had been with her, doing something all night, and then she'd slept all day while Sousuke went to school, Kaname decided. Her reconstruction was full of holes, but she lacked the objectivity to recognize them.

I wonder how they met. . . .

Perhaps she was a dead war buddy's daughter. Or maybe she was someone like Kaname, whom Sousuke had saved in the past. In any case, they probably had a very dramatic meeting, like one from the latest James Bond movie, which Kaname had watched a few days earlier. Certainly, Kaname determined, it was far more exciting than the way Kaname and Sousuke had met.

She really had no reason to think this, but Kaname was on a roll.

I wonder what he's doing right now. He and his girlfriend probably were eating or something—sitting across the table from each other, staring into each other's eyes, chattering happily . . . saying "I love you."

Of course, Kaname had no reason to suspect that Sousuke, at that very moment, was disposing of terrorists' bodies in a sullen manner.

Kaname flipped on the TV, turning it off almost immediately to resume her mental wandering for about ten more minutes. The doorbell rang.

Who could that be, at a time like this? Dammit! Sitting up on the sofa, Kaname debated whether to fake being out. Ultimately, she got up and walked to the door.

Without looking to see who it was, she threw open the door to reveal Sousuke's surly face. And he had brought his girlfriend, too. She looked more somber than Sousuke. *Great.* They also had a boy with them whom Kaname didn't know. Unsurprisingly, he also looked quite dour.

"What do you want?" Kaname barked.

"We're in trouble and need to hide here," Sousuke stated.

While protesting that it was a "huge pain" and "not her problem," Kaname put on the teapot. She was either very good mannered or simply kind-hearted. In any case, it was nice of her to help them.

However, when she had heard the whole story, her disposition did not improve.

"Let me get this straight," she recounted, plunking her tea cup on the table. "Bloodthirsty terrorists are chasing you because you're holding this guy—who, by the way, has a major attitude problem?"

When they arrived, Sousuke had wanted to stash Takuma in the bathroom or the closet, but Kaname resisted, so Sousuke simply sat him down out of reach. Presently, Takuma sat quietly.

"And this girl is a colonel who outranks you?"

"That's correct."

"I know you're not exactly good at making up stories, Sousuke, but now you're being plain mean."

With Takuma sitting right there, Sousuke and Tessa didn't feel comfortable discussing the details of Mithril's internal organizational structure, leaving gaps in the story large enough that Kaname didn't believe it.

"You said your name's Testarossa? How old are you?"

"Sixteen . . . and a half." Tessa sipped her tea. She now wore a pair of Sousuke's old cargo pants, which barely managed to stay up, even with the aid of a belt.

"A sixteen-year-old girl is a submarine captain?" Kaname scoffed. "Please! I've seen *The Hunt for Red October.* I know captains are tough old bastards like Sean Connery. At most, I'd think you were one of the people who reads the telegrams or something."

It was such an outrageous accusation, all Tessa could do was nod.

"We're telling you the truth, Chidori," implored Sousuke.

"Honestly, I couldn't care less about, um, whatever's going on between you two. However, it's not okay for you to sit here and lie to me like this."

It was a mistake to come here, regretted Sousuke.

Sousuke knew that the enemy wouldn't expect them to hide at Kaname's nearby apartment. Invariably dense, though, he never considered the possibility that Kaname wouldn't accept his explanation of the situation.

And Tessa was no help—she merely sat there, quietly sipping her tea. There was no indication that she would send the struggling Sousuke a lifeboat. Maybe it was his imagination, but it seemed like

her attitude became strangely indifferent when he told her they were going to Kaname's place.

"Colonel. Colonel?"

Tessa didn't react. After several seconds, she finally realized he was talking to her.

"Oh, you mean *me.* What is it?"

This interchange added to Kaname's skepticism.

Frustrated, Sousuke said: "Please, Colonel, perhaps you could explain this."

"Explain what?"

"Your position and the current circumstances, ma'am."

"Oh. Yes. Um, there is an assault . . . submarine. I am the captain and a colonel. Sousuke is one of my subordinates. And that's the truth, Miss Chidori."

Sousuke broke into a cold sweat. Why, in this particular situation, did Tessa give such an inarticulate explanation? And why on Earth did she pick this moment to call him by his first name? In addition to implying a familiarity that didn't truly exist, it seemed somewhat spiteful to him. What had he done to deserve this?

"C-colonel."

"Was that sufficient, Sergeant Sagara?" she asked with a false smile.

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded gravely. "You see, Chidori, that's how it is."

"Fine, I get it," Kaname said, although her tone implied the opposite. "After all, I'm a very patient person. If you say that's how it is, then that's how it'll be."

Kaname scowled at Takuma. "So, on to the next problem: Who is this guy, and why is he grinning like that? He's really starting to get on my nerves."

"I'm sorry, Miss Kaname Chidori," Takuma offered quietly.

"You certainly don't *look* sorry," she noted. "After I went to the trouble of serving you tea, you haven't touched it!"

"I'm not thirsty."

Kaname smacked the table, causing Tessa to jump; the normally unflappable Takuma even jolted a little. Kaname peered up into his face.

"It's only polite," Kaname grumbled intensely. "Drink it. Those tea leaves are expensive, you know."

"And if I refuse?"

"I have flat Dr. Pepper in the fridge, and I will pour it down your throat until you cry and beg me to stop."

Takuma wasn't sure how to respond.

"I'm serious."

Takuma picked up the teacup and took a showy sip. "Happy?"

"Well, isn't that precious? You know, I'd really love to meet your parents. I bet they really spoiled you."

At the mention of parents, Takuma's eyes grew sharp, and Sousuke prepared for another violent fit that didn't come. Instead, Takuma glared at Kaname with his cruel, dark eyes.

Kaname did not feel threatened, however; instead, she smirked like a general who had discovered the enemy army's weakness.

"Oh, I'm sorry," her voice dripped in sarcasm. "You don't like us to tease you about mommy, huh?"

"I don't . . ." Takuma seethed, "have a mother."

This momentarily silenced Kaname. "How unexpected. Well, neither do I, and neither does Sousuke. You didn't think you were the only motherless child in the world, did you?"

Once again, Takuma was speechless.

"Or maybe you did. Well, that explains that sulky face of yours. I'll bet your home life was a real piece of work."

Takuma began grunting, and his eyes lost focus. He unleashed a bizarre howl.

Uh oh, here it comes, understood Sousuke. He didn't know exactly what kind of condition Takuma had, but certain emotions triggered extreme aggressiveness.

With a deranged yowl, Takuma lunged at Kaname.

Sousuke quickly intercepted him and restrained him from the side.

Kaname gaped while Sousuke pulled the flailing boy away from the table. Soon, her expression morphed into a smile, and she flashed a peace sign at Tessa. "I win: He flipped out."

As he pinned the raging maniac to the floor, Sousuke regretted coming to Kaname's place.

During the struggle, Sousuke grabbed Takuma's left arm.

"Huh?"

There was something stiff in Takuma's arm. It felt hard, and cylindrical. He probably would have thought it was a bone if Sousuke weren't so familiar with the human body—but he knew something was buried in Takuma's arm.

Deciding it would be easier to investigate without Takuma struggling, Sousuke thwacked the back of Takuma's head with his hand, skillfully rendering him unconscious.

"Colonel," he demanded her attention.

"What is it?" she reacted, immediately standing up.

"Feel this."

He pointed out the stiff spot, and Tessa prodded at it with her fingers. Her face grew quite serious.

"Figures. We were careless."

"You know what it is?"

"Yes. It's a transmitter that puts out a locational pulse once every few minutes. They originally were designed to keep tabs on prisoners who work outdoors. And," she thought for a moment, "if I remember correctly, they're made almost entirely of acrylic and silicon, so metal detectors don't sense them."

By the time the explanation was over, Sousuke was in full combat mode, gun drawn and all. The enemy most certainly already knew their whereabouts and could attack at any time.

There had been no reason for them to look for a transmitter buried in Takuma's body. At least there hadn't an intelligence leak.

"What's wrong?" Kaname inquired.

"This could be bad. Stay away from the windows and the door," Sousuke ordered.

He searched for any sign of attackers outside the apartment. None. Yet. Perhaps the terrorists were being more cautious because

the first attack had ended so disastrously. Maybe they were waiting for reinforcements.

"So . . ."

"Yes, Chidori?"

"You're saying there's something inside his arm?"

"That's correct. A transmitter to let the enemy know where he is," Sousuke answered, slightly irritated. "Colonel, should we extract it? I have a knife here. And morphine."

"Yes, we have no choice. I don't know much about surgery, though."

"I'll do it."

Sterilize, incise, remove, stitch. Sousuke doubted the enemy would grant him enough time for the procedure—but if they were going to keep Takuma with them, they had to neutralize the transmitter.

"Hey, you know . . ." Kaname tapped Sousuke on the shoulder as he pulled out a syringe.

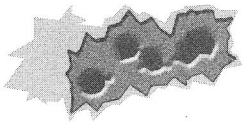
"What? I'm busy right now."

"Couldn't you just break the transmitter?"

"Yes," Tessa answered instead of Sousuke. "Please, stand back."

"Hold on. I have a big microwave. Why don't we use that?"

Sousuke and Tessa looked at each other.



Thrusting a chopstick into a small hole in the microwave's doorframe, Sousuke fooled the machine into thinking the door was closed.

Sousuke wrapped a rubber pad with a hole in it—an insulator—around the unconscious Takuma's arm, leaving just the part with the transmitter exposed. Then, Sousuke bent the boy's elbow and put it in the microwave.

"Shouldn't take more than a few seconds."

"Right," Kaname agreed. "Let's do this."

She twisted the timer dial and pressed the switch. Microwaves are lethal to precision equipment, even over very short time periods. The microwaves poured into the transmitter. Kaname counted to five.

"Turning it off now." She cranked the dial back to zero, and the machine dinged. There was no visible change; regardless, the transmitter most likely had been destroyed.

"I've never seen such an unorthodox operation," Tessa commented. For all she knew, if it hadn't worked, the blood in Takuma's arm could have boiled.

"We're safe now, right?"

"True, but . . ." Tessa trailed off. At first, she felt a secret superiority over Kaname; now, that attitude of disdain faded. Tessa felt humbled to be outwitted by such rudimentary science.

"It's still too early to say we're safe," Sousuke announced, staying in the kitchen. "Once they know the transmitter's broken, they'll attack right away, so we have to get out of here in a hurry."

"If they know where we are, though, they're probably watching the entrance."

It would be best if they could escape the complex without the enemy seeing them in order to avoid unnecessary combat.

"Chidori, is there a fire escape on the balcony?"

"You mean that little hole in the floor out there?"

"We'll go that way," decided Sousuke, slinging Takuma over his shoulder. He headed for the balcony, and Tessa followed.

Parting the curtains, Sousuke scanned their surroundings. There was no indication of anyone watching the building from across the way. He assumed there was no one watching from their side.

Staying low, Sousuke went onto the verandah and located the square, wooden door on the floor. If he opened it, they could go down to the next landing.

"So, you're leaving?" asked Kaname. "Okay, see ya."

"Don't be silly. You're coming with us."

"What?"

"If you stay here, they'll come to get you." To get Sousuke's destination out of her, the enemy might resort to torturing Kaname.

"Wait a minute! I don't want any part of this."

"You're right. I'm sorry, but I already got you wrapped up in this."

"This isn't funny!" She yelled loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. "I don't want to come along while you two elope! That's cruel, Sousuke!"

"I already told you, Chidori, the two of us are—"

"Save it! I don't want to hear your measly excuses. I'm fine on my own, so focus on worrying about protecting your own girlfriend!"

Kaname could be awfully stubborn sometimes. Sousuke didn't have a clue how to convince her.

"You misunderstand, Miss Chidori," interjected Tessa. "Mister Sagara's right. I'm very sorry we involved you in this. Now, however, for your safety, we'll have to move together."

Unlike her previous attempts to convince Kaname, Tessa was in high spirits now, and she obviously wasn't lying.

"Earlier, you . . ."

"I carried a bad joke too far," Tessa stated. "For that, I apologize. You probably won't believe me, but I *am* his superior officer, and I *am* in charge of several hundred people."

Kaname gaped.

"Believe me, Mithril is not your typical organization."

Kaname's eyes went from Tessa to Sousuke and back, finally settling on Takuma. Indeed, this assortment of people was not as simply defined as Kaname originally had thought. Grudgingly, she nodded.

"I still don't really understand, but I'll go with you, all right? Hell."

"Thank you. Let's go, Mister Sagara."

"Yes, ma'am." Internally, Sousuke sighed with relief. He didn't dare tell Kaname that the terrorists might break in anyway and trash her apartment looking for clues as to their whereabouts.

"Hold on, I need to get some things."

"We don't have time for that."

"I'm just going to grab my phone, okay? I need to call Kyouko and have her tape my favorite show." Kaname disappeared into her bedroom for a moment.

By the time she returned, the door in the floor was open, and Tessa was struggling to shove Takuma through it as Sousuke waited below. Once Sousuke had the boy, the two girls descended. Tessa was slow and awkward, and Kaname had to help her.

Whoever lived in the apartment below didn't seem to notice them, probably because of the baseball game blaring on the TV inside. It was the bottom of the eighth, two outs, with a runner on third. The score was four to one.

"Whoa! Hanshin's winning," whispered Kaname.

"Let's keep moving."

They went down another story.

The lights inside the next apartment were off—apparently, no one was home. Seeing this as an opportunity, Sousuke broke the window and walked into the living room. Holding Takuma in a fireman's carry, he went to the front door and quietly cracked it open a few centimeters.

Looking outside, he saw a black van parked on the street in front of the apartment complex. There was a man in the driver's seat; Sousuke couldn't see into the back seats because of the vehicle's tinted windows. Sousuke couldn't tell whether it was the enemy, but at least the driver didn't seem to notice Sousuke.

"Let's go."

After quickly memorizing the van's license plate, he snuck into the communal hallway. Kaname and Tessa followed Sousuke as he descended the emergency stairs, climbed over the handrail on the first floor, and entered the shrubs behind the building.

"Oh!" As Tessa attempted to climb over the railing, she caught her foot and fell backward to the ground. Sousuke and Kaname rushed to help her up.

"It's okay," she choked, "I'm fine."

She appeared uninjured, yet about to cry, regardless.

"Where do we go now?" asked Kaname as she surveyed the area from a cluster of hydrangeas.

"I was wondering about the same thing. We'd stick out in a lot of places."

"True," Kaname agreed. She looked at Tessa, who seemed dispirited.

Mithril has a car in a nearby parking lot, but I want to avoid traveling by auto. The police probably are being more vigilant than usual, and we must assume they're looking for Takuma.

"I'd prefer a place nearby that we know well, where there's very little danger of getting other people involved." Sousuke decided from a purely tactical point of view.

Kaname understood, and she held up a finger toward the sky. "Eureka! I know just the place."

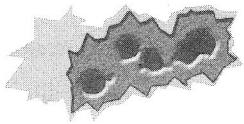
"Where?"

"School."

"No good. They'll find us there."

Sousuke knew the enemy would search Kaname's apartment and find many artifacts linking her to Jindai High School.

"There's another, closer high school."



June 26, 21:07 (Japan Standard Time)
Koto, Tokyo, Japan
Akami Wharf

As soon as Andrei Kalinin regained consciousness, he gave his body a mental inspection. At the very least, his nervous system was intact enough to transmit intense pain. Discounting a cracked rib, there was little damage to his bones. There was damage to his liver, but not enough to threaten his life. He had six large lacerations on his arms and back; the responsible pieces of glass were nowhere to be found,

however, and the bleeding already had stopped. He estimated that he had lost a lot of blood. Overall, he was exhausted, but he appeared to have cheated death once again.

I'm on a ship, he realized. There was no damage to his ears—he could tell the ship was anchored, and he could hear the gentle lapping of waves and the faint sound of boots echoing on the steel frame.

After waiting to make sure no one else was present, Kalinin opened his eyes and moved his neck a little, ignoring the fierce pain that ran up and down his whole right side.

He was in a small, amber-colored room. There was a crude bed and a bare incandescent bulb in the ceiling. The walls were rusty, especially around a large iron door, which Kalinin assumed was locked from the outside.

Handcuffs kept Kalinin's right ankle chained to the bed. He picked up his head and saw that somebody had given him rudimentary first aid. He still had on his pants, but the tight muscles of his torso were exposed, except for several layers of bandages here and there.

Inept medics, Kalinin sighed. *There must not be a doctor in the group.*

About five minutes later, a clinking sound indicated someone outside the door. After a moment, the door opened, and a woman

came in. It was the same woman he had spoken to shortly before passing out in the research center; he thought he'd heard that her name was Seina. She still had on the orange pilot suit.

"You're awake," she said in a voice as cold and delicate as a snowflake.

"Can I help you?" Kalinin asked belligerently, not troubling himself with trying to get up.

"I want to talk to you."

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," he growled. "I'll kill you and dump your carcass in the sea."

"Please. I could do that at any time." Seina smiled coldly and leaned against the door. "Your subordinate is quite a find—he defeated three of our men and managed to escape with Takuma and your secretary."

The Captain and Yang escaped with the boy after all, inferred Kalinin, assuming Seina meant Testarossa when she said "secretary." By himself, it would have been a lot for Yang to handle; with the captain, too, it was not impossible, though.

"He is one of yours, right? Sousuke Sagara?"

At the mention of that name, Kalinin's face nearly registered his surprise.

Sousuke? Kalinin wondered what happened to Yang. He was relieved that the captain managed to take refuge at Sousuke's place, though.

"Regardless of whether he is, I hope you don't think you're going to get anything else out of me."

"I'm a realist," Seina said. "With those wounds, the torture probably will kill you before you talk."

"Then, why save me at all?"

"I wanted to try talking to you, at least. Who you are is not really important in the grand scheme of things, however."

"I can't imagine why you'd say that."

"Well, by one look at you, I can tell your organization is some distance removed from the police and military. There's no depth to your movements; your job is to connect the dots, nothing more. Although you seem to do pretty well on your own, ultimately, you won't be much of a threat."

She meant that Mithril acted alone, without backing from a resource like a government agency. Its isolation certainly was one of Mithril's weaknesses.

"You appear to be quite the leader yourself," Kalinin appraised.

"Perhaps," she responded, readily admitting her role as the individual in charge, "but I know a better one yet. Ever heard of Seiji Takechi?"

"No."

"He's a Japanese mercenary. He was in the Vietnam War and then in Congo, Yeme, Nicaragua, Lebanon—the list goes on forever. He's a real veteran, a reconnaissance and survival technique specialist.

"After joining the Kurdistan Republican Army in the fifth Middle East War," she continued, with a trace of life in her voice now, "he returned to Japan to start a business. Know what it was?"

"I'm guessing it wasn't a security firm."

"Welfare work," she said. "He called the organization A2I, and its mission was the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, including the notoriously bad: serial robbers, batterers, murderers, rapists, arsonists—the bottom of the barrel."

Kalinin awaited the rest of the story.

"Seiji Takechi assembled all those good-for-nothings on his own private island, where he taught them his personal survival and combat techniques. Everyone—even those who resisted him at first—obeyed him. The island had no electricity, no running water, no food. If the recruits didn't take his training seriously, they couldn't survive."

"Effective," Kalinin approved.

"Yes. Instead of teaching with love, he used a hostile environment for a classroom, teaching his students how to kill efficiently. Consequently, his students became very self-confident. There was no need for them to be petty criminals anymore."

"That's a nice story, but there must be more to it," Kalinin pressed.

"There is. When a TV station caught wind of the training, it sent a crew. When they stumbled into some equipment in an old storeroom, seven people died in an accident." Seinà looked at the floor for a moment, as though stuck in the memory.

"It was downhill from there. The media ganged up on us, although the accident was obviously their fault. They treated us like a training camp for terrorists, as if we were preparing for some kind of attack. They were like a pack of hyenas. The police started to meddle and, ultimately, the camp shut down. That's when the history of all the students got printed in the paper." She sounded really angry now. "Including mine. As if I needed to be reminded about what my scumbag father did."

Kalinin guessed it had been uglier than merely an act of violence. He felt confident that her father no longer walked the Earth—and also that he knew who was responsible for that state of affairs.

It seemed that A21 was not simply a terrorist group made up of armed radical militiamen.

Walking briskly toward Kalinin, Seina lowered her face, leaning in close so that he could feel her breath. "Know why I told you all this?" Her face was as expressionless as a mask.

"I don't," he answered, despite having several guesses.

"You remind me of him—Seiji Takechi."

It seemed improbable that any Japanese man resembled a half-Russian, half-Estonian. Maybe they smelled the same.

"Still, I doubt you're planning to let me go."

"That depends on you. May I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"If someone called you a thief and killed you, and your subordinates sought revenge, how would you feel? Would you smile?"

"I wouldn't feel anything," he stated. "I'd be turning into dirt. Dirt doesn't feel."

"How boring. Okay, I will kill you." She pulled out a pistol.

"I told you it was a pointless conversation."

"Yes, I was a fool, especially considering I have other things to do."

"Revenge?" posed Kalinin.

Seina considered this for a moment. "I've never called it that. I just . . . we want to paint this peace-rotted town our own colors. We'll engulf the city in the flames of fear and spread destruction. If that's revenge, then so be it."

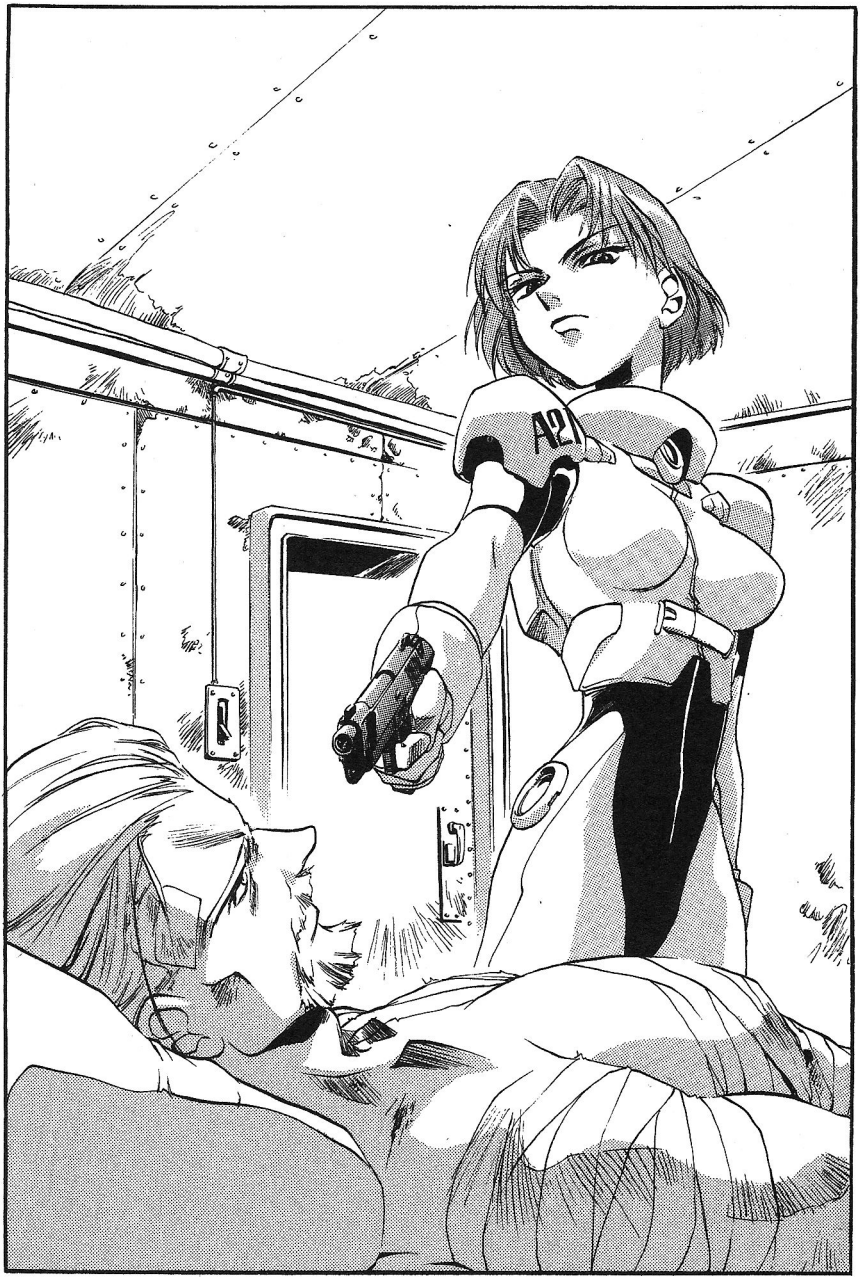
Nihilism was her fuel. The others in her group probably were the same. It was not a transient rage, but a cold fury that built up over a long period of time—a basic sense of being at odds with the whole world. And that's the only thing that drove her. Kalinin had met many people like her in the past.

Seina aimed her gun at Kalinin. "I swear that we're going to find and kill your subordinate, Sousuke Sagara, and the others. We'll get Takuma back."

"For the Lambda Driver?" Using that terminology was a gamble, but Kalinin was familiar with life-and-death bargaining. Considering what kind of damage the group could do, it was best to make Seina understand and respect Kalinin and his allies. He hoped they would torture him long enough for Tessa to reach safety.

Sure enough, Seina's face registered surprise. "Surprising. You might know something, after all."

"Perhaps I'm more interesting to you now."


A21

"Yes, much more than before," she stated, replacing her gun in its holster. She moved toward the door.

"By the way," Kalinin called, "what's Seiji Takechi doing now?"

Seina froze in her tracks. "He's dead. What a waste. He hanged himself in his jail cell."

Sousuke, Kaname, Tessa, and Takuma crept up to the school's student council office on the second floor. Kaname knew it well and said she would be most at ease there.

For a moment, everyone took a seat. Takuma was awake now, and Sousuke kept close to him.

"Want some tea?" Kaname offered as she walked to the corner of the room.

"No, thank you," answered Tessa, who'd already had several cups of coffee and tea that day, at each of the previous refuges.

"Suit yourself. So, we just wait here, right?"

"Right," confirmed Sousuke. "The reinforcements are on the way."

As soon as they got into the office, he made contact with the satellite communicator. Mao, Kurz, and a helicopter carrying an M9 already were in the sky somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. Their ETA was within the next two hours.

"My people will get here first," warned Takuma. "It doesn't matter where you hide."

"We took care of that."

Takuma looked confused.

"We destroyed your transmitter," bragged Kaname. "In the microwave."

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For once, Takuma looked slightly concerned.

I guess he knew about the transmitter, thought Sousuke, *but there was no reason to tell him we neutralized it. Oh, well.* It wasn't really a big deal, so he kept quiet.

At this point, the terrorist group had no way to find them. There was no paper trail to lead them to this school.

For now, it's probably okay to relax a little.

"Now then . . ." Kaname said, pulling her PHS phone out of the back pocket of her tight, denim miniskirt.

Sousuke furrowed his brow. "Who are you calling?"

"Kyouko."

"For what reason?"

"I told you already. I want her to tape my favorite show. This'll just take a second."

"Don't mention where we are."

"Well, I suppose I *could* watch it on the TV in here," Kaname replied, growing sullen, "except that might catch the janitor's attention. See? I'm trying to be cautious for your sake, although I have *absolutely nothing to do with this.*"

Sousuke gulped.

"What, is bossing me around the only way you can talk to me, Mister Super Awesome Sergeant Sagara? Huh?"

Whenever Sousuke treated Kaname like an uninformed amateur (as he would with any other civilian), he opened the door for her merciless counterattacks. As usual, Sousuke couldn't figure out how to respond, so he hung his head and fidgeted with his submachine gun. Tessa watched the whole exchange, completely blown away.

Defiantly, Kaname turned the jog dial on her PHS and pressed the switch. There was no electric sound, which meant the phone was in silent mode.

"Whenever there's a crisis, you always think you're the most important person around, and that gets extremely annoying. You should fix that. Oh, Missus Tokiwa!"

Kaname became suddenly cheerful. "Hi, this is Chidori. Oh, yes, thank you . . . I had some, too. It was great . . . ha ha . . . yes, please . . . Hey, Kyouko! Do you think you could you do me a small favor?"

"Mister Sagara," whispered Tessa, "is she always that angry?"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, not always."

"How strange . . . especially considering you possess a wealth of experience and knowledge."

"Yes, but that doesn't always matter."

"It doesn't?"

"No, ma'am," he explained. "And then, I get a glimpse of her quick-witted side, so to speak."

Shrugging, Sousuke toyed with his gun's sight adjustment button.

Tessa gazed wordlessly at his profile for a moment. "Right now, I get the impression that you're more likely to take orders from her than you are from me, Mister Sagara."

"No, ma'am. That would never happen."

"It's debatable." Tessa turned away.

What a ridiculous situation, thought Sousuke. He was doing nothing more than trying to do his job, but Tessa and Kaname were jumping down his throat at every opportunity. *What in the world did I do to deserve this?*

Sousuke could not recall ever being as anxious for the arrival of reinforcements. He didn't care who showed up, as long as they did it soon.

A moment later, Kaname got off the phone. "You know, school buildings are pretty creepy at night," she muttered, stuffing the phone back into her pocket. "I'm not sure about this place, but Jindai's got its fair share of ghost stories. Ever heard of 'Hanako of the Restroom'?"

"That sounds like the title of an adult film," Tessa quietly declared.

"What's scary about her?" Sousuke spoke at the same time as Tessa. "Does she have a bomb strapped to her chest or what?"

Hearing their absurd responses, Kaname drooped. "Forget it. Oh, but I have to tell you about 'Backbend Phantom Boy.' It's a scary story from Jindai High."

"What's it about?"

"You'll see." Kaname crawled over the desk and whispered into Tessa's ear. As Kaname relayed the story, Tessa turned beet red, then paling just as quickly.

"How perverted!"

"Yeah, but it's scary, right?"

"Dear Lord! If someone like that showed up around here, I would simply die."

Watching Tessa tremble, Sousuke shook his head in confusion.

He soon was distracted by footsteps in the hallway. The steps were quite distant—probably somewhere near the stairwell. It was a leisurely gait, but they definitely were coming in their direction. The footsteps stopped every few seconds, and then there was the sound of a door opening and closing.

"It's the janitor," clucked Kaname. "He'll check in here, too."

"We need to hide." Sousuke prodded Takuma under a desk. "Everyone under the desk. Hurry. Don't make a sound."

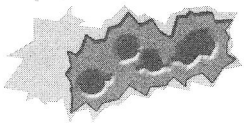
"We'll see about that," Takuma smirked.

Underneath the desk, there was a cluster of cardboard boxes full of books and papers. There was barely enough room for the four of them to squeeze in like sardines.

Doing their best to control their breathing, the four waited as the door opened. A flashlight's beam illuminated the room. Sousuke reckoned a normal patrol wouldn't include an overly detailed search.

"You there! Come on out," rasped the janitor.

When Sousuke looked at the little cylinder of light, he noticed Tessa's hip sticking out from under the desk.



"You can't hide just from the waist up, you know," reasoned the old janitor as he led the trespassers down a dark hallway. "I sure didn't expect to find such a lovely and foreign upper body. What a weird night. What's with the toy guns—you kids playing war?"

"Um . . ." Tessa looked completely defeated.

"Well, here we are," the janitor said as they reached his office on the first floor. After removing their shoes (the small office was a tidy Japanese-style room), the four dispirited captives entered. They sat in a circle around a low table.

"Want some tea?"

"No," said everyone except Takuma. They'd all had more than enough tea.

"Oh, come on. It's good for you," he insisted. "I have some great leaves!"

And without asking again, the man brought in tea cups and poured hot water into the small teapot on the table.

"What's this school called again?" asked Takuma out of the blue. "Fushimidai Academy?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I feel like I've been here before." He paused and waited for someone else to say something. "Must be my imagination. Forget it."

Since he'd come into their custody, this was the first time Takuma had spoken this way. It was nothing short of aberrant.

"What are you trying to pull?" asked Sousuke.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think you can get away, do you?"

"Hardly," Takuma grumbled. "I've seen how strong you are."

"Sousuke, don't be so suspicious," scolded Kaname. "True, he's really creepy, and he likes to flip out and go nuts, but still . . ."

The old janitor poured everyone some tea. "I don't know what the hell you kids are talking about, but you ought to go home while the trains still are running. Your parents must be worried sick. I won't tell the school about this, okay?"

"I'm really sorry we bothered you." Kaname bowed, not bothering to point out that neither she nor Sousuke had worried parents. Tessa probably didn't either. They knew Takuma was without a mother, too.

"Takuma, do you have any family?" Tessa queried.

"I have an older sister."

"What kind of person is she?"

"You have no reason to ask that," he replied, more irritated than he should've been.

"True, but the reason we're in this predicament is because we let you live. So, is there really any harm in making small talk?"

He smoldered for a moment.

"I have an older brother," volunteered Tessa while staring at her tea dregs. "I don't know where he is now. He's far superior to me."

Kaname laughed. "You mean he doesn't fall off railing or leave his butt hanging out when trying to hide?"

"Let me ask you something, Miss Chidori," Tessa shot back. "Can you give the correct answer to Einstein's system of ten, coupled, nonlinear, partial differential equations, without any previous knowledge?"

"What?" Kaname couldn't begin to understand the question, much less the answer.

"I could at age six," Tessa declared. "My brother did it at age four."

"I'm not sure," Kaname marveled, "but I think that's pretty incredible."

"Yes, very." Tessa nonchalantly sipped her tea. "Yet, I've always felt inferior."

"And?" Takuma asked.

"What?" Tessa responded automatically.

"How did you get along with him?"

"Well, I suppose the best way to put it is that I was protected. It wasn't really what you'd call a healthy relationship," she lamented. "That's all in the past, though. Takuma, do you feel inferior to your sister?"

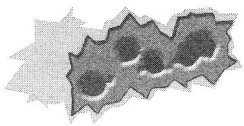
"What? What are you—"

"You do, don't you?" She inspected Takuma's face, stuck in an expression of denial.

After a moment of frustration, he shrugged it off. "Maybe I do have an inferiority complex. I do idolize her."

"That's the first time you've really revealed anything about yourself."

Stubbornly, Takuma clamped shut his mouth and looked away, thus ending the discussion about family.



The next forty minutes passed without incident.

There was no sign of anyone having tracked them—which made sense, considering the enemy had no way of knowing about Fushimidai High School.

Kaname watched her TV show with the old janitor.

Tessa, who earlier had complained about lack of sleep, napped with her head on the table.

Takuma sat cross-legged next to Sousuke. Takuma's eyes were closed. At one point, he'd begun to breathe heavily and show signs

of agitation, but that passed without turning into belligerence, and Takuma had regained his senses.

When the TV show ended and the commercials began to blare, Kaname rose and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Sousuke.

"That's no question to ask a young lady."

Completely oblivious, Sousuke raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to the restroom," Kaname said, turning red.

"I'm going, too," Tessa decided, waking up instantly.

"Very well. For safety's sake, I will—"

"No, you won't!" Tessa and Kaname barked simultaneously.

"You're so clueless!" snapped Kaname.

"There's no need for concern, Mister Sagara," Tessa assured him.

"Understood." Reluctantly, Sousuke sat down. "Please, don't turn on any lights or speak above a whisper."

Kaname and Tessa left for the ladies' room, making their way through the dim hallway. Light from the streetlights and red fire-hydrant lamps outside trickled through the windows. At the far end of the hall, the faint fluorescent exit sign hummed gloomily. School buildings were downright *eerie* at night.

"You sure jumped at the chance to go with me," Kaname noted. "You afraid to go alone?"

"Perhaps. You did tell those terrible stories earlier."

"Ah, yes," Kaname laughed. "You know, this is exactly the kind of hallway Backbend Phantom Boy appears in."

"Stop that, please," begged Tessa.

A moment later, they made it to the bathroom, where they separated into adjacent stalls. As Kaname reached for the hem of her miniskirt, she realized that her phone was not in her back pocket. She rifled through her other pockets, but it wasn't there. It was gone.

Maybe I dropped it in the janitor's office, she hoped. That seemed unlikely, though. She hadn't heard it fall out when she stood up from the TV, and it would have made a sound striking the tatami mat. Maybe she'd dropped it earlier, in the student council office.

Preoccupied, she finished her business, walked out, and washed her hands. Tessa was still inside her stall.

"Miss Chidori," she called anxiously. "Please, don't leave yet."

"What to do? What to do?" Kaname teased, leaving the bathroom.

When she got into the hallway, she sensed something behind her and turned around to come face to face with a masked man in a black combat uniform holding a knife.

Before Kaname had time to scream, the knife flashed through the air. The sharp edge stopped centimeters away from slashing her throat. The man grabbed Kaname by the shoulder and yanked her toward him.

"Don't make a sound," he commanded in a bloodthirsty whisper. His eyes clearly stated that he would kill her if she did.

Through the darkness, Kaname could make out another man standing by the door to the ladies' room. The second attacker pulled a knife, waiting for Tessa to emerge.

A sticky fear gripped Kaname's heart. Surprisingly, however, her first thought was: *It's a good thing I just went to the bathroom.*

There was the sound of water running and a door opening.

"Miss Chidori? Are you there?"

Kaname wanted to shout a warning to Tessa to run away, but her instincts kicked in and vetoed the notion: Shouting would sign her own death warrant. And if she did call out, Tessa still might not be able to get away. The only escape route was the window in the back of the bathroom—and given Tessa's slow clumsiness, getting through an open window to the outside of the building probably was beyond the realm of possibility.

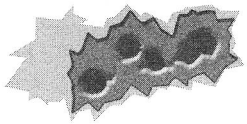
So, Sousuke, thought Kaname, *it's true, after all.* Despite Sousuke's insistence, she really hadn't understood the severity of the situation.

She'd thought he was being overly dramatic, as usual. She'd been wrong. It was the same thing that had happened last time—during that incident two months ago.

I can't believe my hometown is a battlefield.

"Please, stop," pleaded Tessa. "It's really not funny anymore, Miss Chidori." Oblivious, she exited the bathroom.

The waiting man swung down his arm.



They're taking an unusually long time in there, Sousuke determined upon checking his watch. Fifteen minutes had passed since they'd left. Perhaps they'd wandered off or gotten wrapped up in conversation somewhere. Sousuke opened the door to the janitor's office and peered into the hallway. There was no sign of the girls.

"Is something wrong?" the janitor asked, without looking away from the TV news.

"I'm going to check on them." Sousuke turned to Takuma. "Come on, let's go."

There was no way he could leave Takuma there. Then, he heard an electronic sound—a cheerful, cheap-sounding Mozart melody.

It was Kaname's cell phone, and it was coming from Takuma's pocket.

"And now, you know," Takuma said triumphantly, pulling the phone from his pocket. Somewhere along the way, he'd stolen it—probably while they were all had been crammed under the desk in the student council office.

It all became very clear to Sousuke: Earlier, when Takuma deliberately had repeated the name of the school, he must have been on the phone with his people, revealing his location through an open channel.

"Bastard . . ." growled Sousuke.

Mostly, Sousuke was disappointed that he himself had been so careless. Although Takuma suffered from sporadic freak-outs, he was actually pretty clever—definitely not unintelligent.

Almost an hour had passed since the enemy had learned of their location. *An hour!* There was no indication that Takuma's group was near the office, but Kaname and Tessa . . .

"You want to answer it?" Takuma offered Sousuke the ringing phone. Keeping his gun drawn and aimed, Sousuke took the phone and pushed the answer button. There was an unfamiliar man's voice on the other end.

"Sousuke Sagara?"

"Yes."

"We have the two girls. Bring our 'friend' out to the schoolyard in the next sixty seconds." The man hung up.

They'd captured Kaname and Tessa—at least they were still alive, for the time being. Most likely, the enemy wanted to avoid another reckless attack that would result in more casualties; that's why they'd taken hostages instead.

It was a serious situation.

The school grounds were wide open, and Sousuke would make an easy sniper target as soon as he stepped outside. Regardless of the two hostages, emerging right under everyone's noses would be a major mistake. Sousuke never would walk into something he knew to be a trap.

If he were going, he'd need to formulate a plan first. The question was what kind? One minute wasn't much time to plan precautionary measures. *At this point, I have to gamble,* he decided.

He turned to the old janitor. "May I ask you a favor?"

"What is it?"

When he explained what he wanted done, the old man looked suspicious. "Basically, when I hear a loud noise, you want me to turn on all the lights outside?"

Sousuke intended to use gunfire or an explosion to signal the old man to hit the lights, hopefully interfering with the terrorist group's night vision instruments.

"I could get in trouble for doing something like that."

"I realize that; if you don't, though, something worse will happen."

If the janitor said 'no,' there would be nothing Sousuke could do. He held his breath while the janitor considered the idea with a very prudent look.

"Well," the old man said finally, "what the hell—just for a minute."

"Thank you very much," Sousuke said. And he got up, taking Takuma with him toward the school exit.

As they strode quickly down the hall, Sousuke handcuffed his wrist to Takuma's. The submachine gun hung from Sousuke's shoulder. He pulled a grenade from his pocket and yanked the pin out with his teeth. As soon as he took his finger off the fuse lever, the grenade would be armed to explode.

"Why not give up? Resistance is futile!"

"Thanks for the advice, but I'm not in the mood, so save it."

When they stepped out into the dark campus, Sousuke could make out four shadows under the monkey bars on the far side of the

grounds. Kaname and Tessa, their hands tied behind their backs, were flanked by two men wearing combat uniforms.

Sousuke could tell there was someone on top of the building and another figure on top of the gymnasium. Both were in good sniping position but easy to spot.

Raising the grenade and the handcuffed wrist into the air, Sousuke moved forward. "If you shoot me, he dies, too."

If someone shot Sousuke, the grenade would fall out of his hand and explode. Takuma wouldn't be able to escape.

"If you release him, no one gets hurt," yelled the man next to Kaname. "Take off the handcuffs."

"Is that your idea of negotiation?" challenged Sousuke. "Try again."

I know exactly how terrorists with hostages feel, Sousuke thought.

After a moment, the man grunted. "Okay, we'll send one girl over to you. Then, you take off the cuffs."

"Fair enough."

"If you don't follow through, we'll cut off the other girl's ear."

"Do as you will."

"Which girl should we release first?" asked the man.

Now, Sousuke wavered. Whomever they released first would be safer than the one they kept. He knew that things probably would get rough when he made the exchange of Takuma for the second girl.

Kaname or Tessa? From a purely reasonable standpoint, Kaname should be the higher priority, because she was not a member of Mithril. In this matter especially, there was no reason for her to be there. She was a victim.

However, when combat broke out, Tessa would be less adept at running to safety. Sousuke had to admit that her reflexes were less than optimal. If she wasn't released first, the changes of saving her were slim, maybe even non-existent.

Compared to Tessa, Kaname was a real speed demon. The school's athletic clubs competed for her membership. So, wasn't the best option to ask for Tessa first, and then wager on Kaname's physical prowess?

This . . . is quite a dilemma. Tessa or Kaname? From far away, Sousuke could feel the girls' eyes boring holes into him. What were they thinking? What were they hoping? He had no way of knowing.

Ultimately, Sousuke decided to gamble on the most likely way to save them both.

"I'll take the white girl first, and then the Japanese girl."

This decision surprised both of the girls. Kaname's eyes bulged, and it looked like she had a fair number of questions for Sousuke.

I have to believe in Chidori. She can figure out something.

Sousuke wished he could shout that to her, but the presence of the armed men made that impossible; it would be tantamount to announcing that all hell was about to break loose.

"Fine," answered the man, removing Tessa's handcuffs. He gave her a little shove. She resisted at first—she wanted them to send Kaname—but the man shoved her again, and she went forward.

As she approached, the disgruntled expression on her face became more and more apparent to Sousuke. Hers was a profound anger.

"Colonel, get behind me, ma'am."

"Thank you, Sergeant Sagara, but you've made the wrong choice."

"In order to optimize the chances of saving both—"

"Do you think I'm not prepared for situations like this? That, Mister Sagara, is extremely disrespectful."

Sousuke didn't know what to say. So, he'd wounded her pride when he'd defied standard procedure and prioritized her. It was a crushing blow to whatever favorable relationship they'd built up to that point.

"You may reprimand me later," Sousuke squeaked out before turning toward Takuma. "There's a key in my right pocket. Remove the handcuffs with it."

Wordlessly, Takuma plunged his hand into Sousuke's pants pocket, found the key, and unlocked the cuffs.

"They're off!" Sousuke shouted to the man.

"Have him start walking, and we'll let the girl walk to you at the same time," proposed the man. "How's that?"

If it were that simple, it would be great. Sousuke already had killed three of their men, though, so it seemed unlikely that they'd be angling for a peaceful resolution. The man removed Kaname's handcuffs.

"Fine. Let's do this, then."

It was time for him to let go of Takuma, his lifeline. Tessa did not object to handing him over. Sousuke nodded to Takuma, who began to walk forward. On the opposite side, Kaname also walked forward.

In his position, Sousuke was open to a sniper's shot at any time. He assumed the only reason he hadn't been shot already was that the snipers were waiting for Takuma to clear the area.

"When I signal, make a run for the school," instructed Sousuke.

"So I can hide in a corner and cry?" Tessa said petulantly.

"If you don't, you'll be in great danger."

"That was true in your apartment; this time, the situation is different."

"Colonel!"

While Sousuke and Tessa argued, Kaname and Takuma passed each other in the middle of the grounds. Sousuke could sense the snipers' bloodlust.

There was no time left. This was the worst. It was coming. *Now.* Sousuke let his finger off the grenade's lever.

"Run!" he shouted sharply.

He threw the grenade toward the gym, in a straight line between him and the sniper.

The grenade detonated in midair, obstructing the view of the sniper on the gym. By that time, Sousuke already had his gun aimed at the sniper on top of the school.

Beyond Sousuke's sights, the sniper took aim. Just as he was about to fire, intense light flooded the schoolyard.

The old janitor came through!

With his night vision completely compromised, the sniper boldly stood up and took a desperate, blind shot at Sousuke, which hit the ground about ten inches to Sousuke's right.

Calmly, Sousuke took aim and fired his submachine gun in bursts. Three bullets flew out at once, dancing through the air. The rooftop sniper bent backward and collapsed, out of sight.

Now, on to the gymnasium, thought Sousuke.

As Sousuke turned his head, he caught a glimpse of Kaname doing something totally unbelievable: rather than running away, she was grappling with Takuma, apparently trying to use him as a shield. Sousuke had been right to bet on her physical ability—but this was ridiculous. What the hell was he supposed to do?

"I'll handle it," Tessa announced as she took off running.

There was no time to stop her. She made a beeline for Kaname and Takuma, who were a tangled heap of limbs on the ground.

"Colonel!"

There was no time to get her to stop—the other sniper on top of the gym recovered from the grenade blast and targeted Sousuke.

Grunting, Sousuke dove. Where he had been standing a second earlier, a bullet struck, rousing a cloud of dust.

Sousuke fired at the sniper while rolling. It was a great distance, and Sousuke was moving on top of that, so he missed. Sparks scattered across the gym's roof.

His opponent's rifle had a much better range and was more powerful than Sousuke's submachine gun. Apparently, the sniper knew this, as he continued to fire without moving.

Two, three, four shots. Sousuke was at his wit's end, dodging the near misses. He ran in front of a flowerbed. Bricks shattered, and black soil and morning glories flew through the air. The bullets were too close for comfort. Sousuke took a leap behind a water fountain, using its waist high, concrete washstand for cover. He peeked out at Kaname and the others.

Kaname and Takuma continued to scuffle as Tessa approached and attempted to separate them.

The armed men from the far side ran forward, pistols drawn.

Not good. Sousuke aimed at the men running toward the fracas, but the sniper on the gym prevented him from getting a clear shot. Rifle rounds struck the washstand, and concrete shrapnel tore at Sousuke's cheek.

The sniper on the roof didn't seem at all concerned with Kaname or Tessa; then again, Takuma was there, too. The sniper was going to leave that situation up to the men on the ground and concentrate on neutralizing Sousuke.

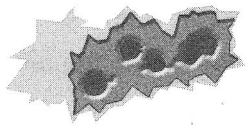
There is nothing I can do.

Sousuke made two miscalculations: Kaname and Tessa. Neither of them ran away. If they had, he could've contained the sniper while they escaped. He never would've predicted this outcome, however.

Sousuke glanced up at the gym and gaped.

The sniper had exchanged his rifle for a different weapon: a disposable anti-tank rocket launcher! It had the power to punch a large hole in a building—or even a pillbox. The water fountain didn't stand a chance.

The man fired the rocket, and the explosive, plastic round flew at Sousuke, leaving behind a trail of smoke. It struck, blowing the water fountain to pieces.



Several seconds earlier, Tessa had reached Kaname. "Let go of him! You have to run!"

"What? Why'd you come back?" Kaname asked, surprised. She twisted Takuma's ear.

"I'll distract them. You get over—"

A violent, explosive roar interrupted Tessa's instructions. A shockwave rumbled through their bellies, and a wall of warm air struck them.



Intense black smoke rose from a water fountain in the corner of the school grounds. Scattered chunks of concrete mixed with water that was gushing out from a ruptured main, creating a rather dangerous rain.

Sousuke was nowhere to be seen. Nowhere. *Did he get caught in the middle of that explosion?*

"Whoa . . ."

While Kaname and Tessa stood in mute amazement, the men in black combat uniforms ran up behind them, still pointing their pistols. With the men this close, the girls wouldn't be able to escape.

"I'd say he's toast."

The girls didn't respond.

"You can run if you want to," said one of the men, "if you prefer to get shot in the back."

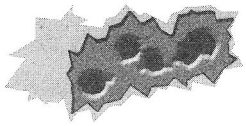
"Wait," interjected Takuma. "We can't kill them yet."

"What're you talking about?"

"This one's . . ." He paused and hung his head. "Oh, never mind."

The man with the gun spoke into his headset. "We have him. We'll kill the rest." Whatever the response was on the other end, it made the man snort. "Are you serious? Seina . . . fine, understood."

He sighed and tossed handcuffs at the girls. "Put these on and come with us. Try to run, you're dead."



June 26, 23:27 (Japan Standard Time)
Koto, Tokyo, Japan
Akami Wharf

Kalinin stared at the discolored ceiling from his position on the bed. Although there wasn't a clock in the room, he could tell it was not yet midnight.

Straining his ears, he could hear machines—the groans of motors and compressors, the sound of a crane, the screams of metals rubbing together. *That's the cargo hold,* conjectured Kalinin. Occasionally, he heard a low turbine sound, as if they were testing a very large generator.

They were assembling something in the cargo hold. On second thought, it sounded more like final testing than assembly. It was probably an AS—a special one. Kalinin assumed they intended to use a mech to wreak havoc on the city.

The rusty door opened, and Seina entered. "How are you feeling?"

"How do I look?" Kalinin responded, indicating the blood-soaked bandages.

"You don't appear to be on your deathbed. Yet. Under that gentlemanly exterior, you're a tough old bastard."

"True," he agreed. "Tough enough not to hang myself."

When Kalinin compared himself to her mentor, Seina's expression did not change in the slightest. However, she did approach calmly and place her hand on his left arm—his injured arm. She dug her fingertips into the wound, causing violent pain to course through Kalinin's whole left side.

"Are you calling him a coward?"

"That's for you to decide," Kalinin stated, ignoring the pain.

"What do you mean?"

"Your mentor—Seiji Takechi—exists only inside you now. Your conduct determines his truth. That's all."

People often became angry when called out on their insecurities. If Seina truly believed Takechi were not a coward, she would've laughed it off and it would've been over.

Seina understood that, too, and her vise-grip loosened. She looked away.

"You're an odd duck," she assessed, "more 'priest' than 'soldier.'"

"That's the first time I've heard that," remarked Kalinin. "That would be an interesting change of pace."

Kalinin's response elicited an unsuspected reaction from Seina: a smile. It was not her typical scornful sneer but a genuine smile.

"A robe and a Bible might suit you," she suggested.

"Perhaps."

"I'm sure of it." She laid her hand on his arm, gently this time. "It's too bad."

"What is?"

"That you and I didn't meet—" She took a step back instead of finishing her thought.

"It's not too late," Kalinin told her.

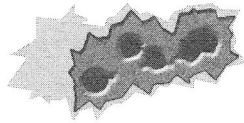
"Yes, it is," already her voice was back to its usual iciness. She walked toward the door. "You were my enemy from the start. I chose not to kill you on a whim. As soon as I find out how much you know about the Lambda Driver, I'll have no use for you."

"I'll tell you nothing."

"Is that so?" She stopped walking. "Sousuke Sagara is dead, and his two female companions are on their way here, along with Takuma. Maybe we'll ask the girls a few questions while you watch."

Kalinin held his tongue.

"Takuma *will* pilot it. And with its power, we'll revolt against the world that denied our mentor. You were right: We are enemies."



June 26, 23:24 (Japan Standard Time)
Chofu, Tokyo, Japan
Fushimidai Academy High School

I wonder how long I was unconscious.

Sousuke sat up from his facedown position. Shards of glass and concrete dust slipped off his back. He checked himself for damage—a few light bruises and small contusions, nothing more. His combat uniform's bulletproof fibers had stopped all the shrapnel.

He looked around. He was on the tile floor of the school's infirmary. Right before the rocket hit, he'd leapt through a window behind the water fountain. The shock wave from the blast knocked him out—even with the wall in between!

Chidori. The colonel.

He staggered to his feet and looked out the charred window at the school grounds. The lights were off again, and the girls were nowhere to be seen. Apparently, they'd been taken captive. It was a relief not to see their corpses on the ground.

Shit! Colossal failure. He'd made a mistake that could not be vindicated. Urzu Seven, owner of an SRT call sign (Mithril's highest level call sign given to combatants), began to cry.

In actuality, it was typical for an ordinary soldier to die in his first gunfight, but that thought didn't cross Sousuke's mind.

"What in Sam's Hill is going on around here?" demanded the old janitor.

"As you can see, I've lost."

"How am I going to explain this to the principal?"

"Simply state the facts. We'll cover the damage."

"Yeah, sure . . ."

Then, Sousuke heard a sound he'd been waiting to hear—rotors and turbine blades. Gusts of wind ripped violently across the school grounds.

Still in ECS invisible mode, the CH-67 transport helicopter landed.

Too late . . . if only they'd been here ten minutes ago.

"Gebo Nine to Urzu Seven. We have a present for you," the helicopter pilot announced into Sousuke's earphone.

"Urzu Seven, roger," Sousuke responded sullenly. "I'm on my way."

Sousuke climbed out the window.

Although it definitely was on the ground, the helicopter still was invisible. Before long, it unloaded its cargo and lifted off into the sky.

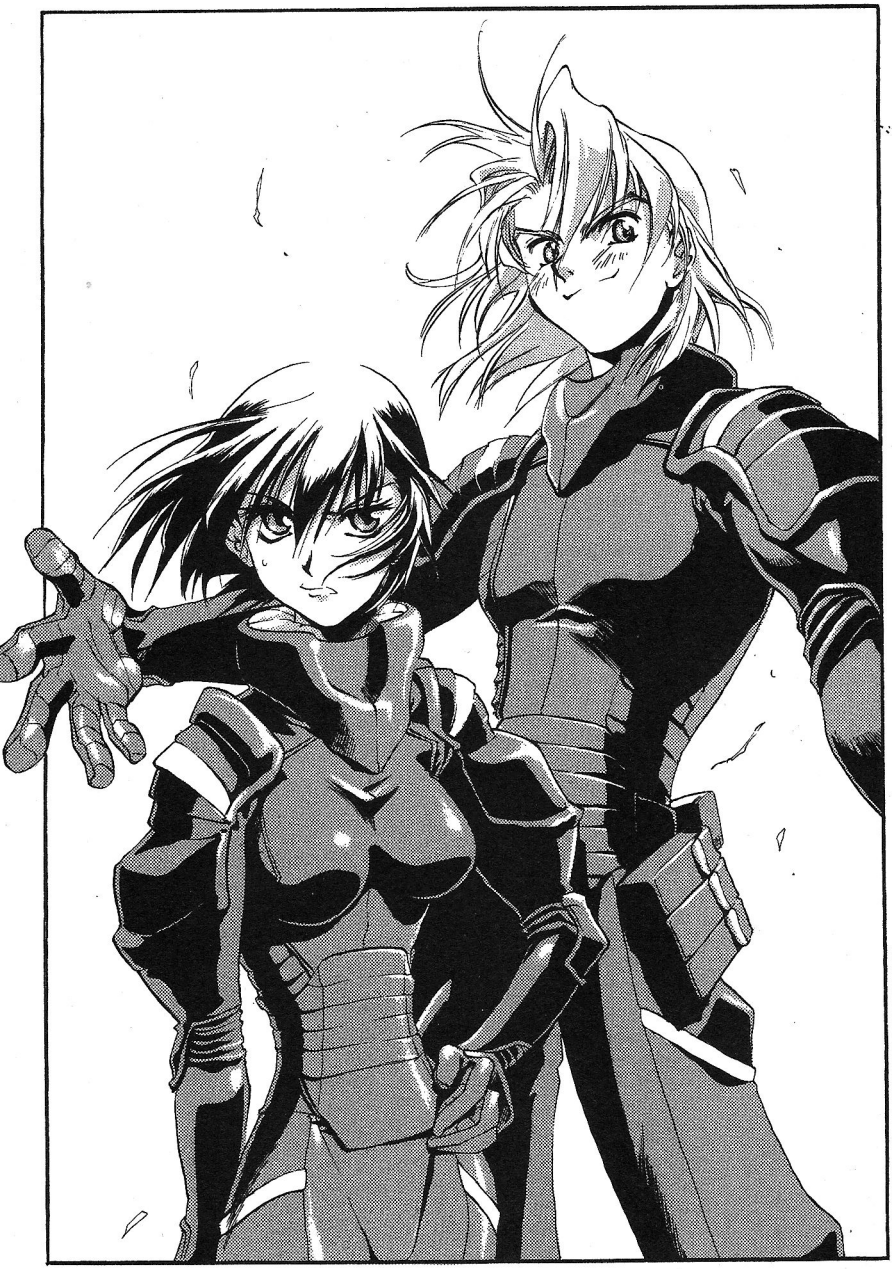
Once again, the silence of nighttime returned to the campus. The dust cloud cleared, and there was a giant form kneeling in the darkness. Standing, it would be at least twenty-six feet tall.

It was an M9 Gernsback, Mithril's AS of choice.

Covered in dark, gray armor, the curved and straight surfaces of the mech cut a lithe silhouette. The head, equipped with two machine guns and sensors, resembled a helmeted fighter pilot. The mount on its back held a short-barreled rifle and a condenser pack for reserve energy.

There were two people standing at the M9's feet—Master Sergeant Melissa Mao and Sergeant Kurz Weber.

Mithril commonly employed three-member teams, and these two soldiers were Sousuke's most frequent pairing.

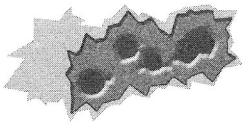


It was an unlikely pairing: an Asian woman with jet-black hair and dark eyes standing alongside a blond, blue-eyed German man. They both wore combat uniforms that doubled as AS pilot suits. In the dark, they looked like ninjas from a distance. There were small splotches of color on their collars and shoulders—violet for Mao and cobalt blue for Kurz.

Kurz was the first to break the silence.

"Where are my hotties?"

Without a word, Mao kicked him in the ass.



June 27, 00:21 (Japan Standard Time)
Kokuryou-cho, Chofu, Tokyo
Tama River Riverbed

Before saying anything, Sousuke, Mao, and Kurz left the schoolyard combat zone.

Although Sousuke had shot one of the snipers, there wasn't any sign of him on the roof. Either the man's comrades had removed his body, or he was merely wounded; it wasn't clear which.

Equipped with ECS invisible mode, the M9 could traverse the city without being seen by civilians. It always was a difficult task, however; this time, the M9 immediately snagged and severed a power line before very nearly kicking a wino.

They passed the area of Sousuke's apartment and stopped in a nearby parking lot to pick up a small truck—a used vehicle bought under the name of one of Mithril's intelligence agents.

Upon reaching the bank of the Tama River, they congregated in front of the truck. The M9 was still transparent, and the smell of burnt ozone hung in the air. Far "upstream," in the dry riverbed, a few kids intermittently shot off some fireworks. *Pom! Pom!*

Sousuke could not calm down. He explained the whole situation to Mao.

"If only we'd gotten there sooner," she sighed. "We had the M9 set to go and everything."

"Will there be further reinforcements?"

"Not yet. It hasn't been the best day for the de Danaan. The lieutenant commander is missing, too."

With Kalinin missing, Mao was more or less in charge. True, other lieutenants assisted Kalinin; but they, along with the other Urzu soldiers, all were off in South China on a top-secret mission.

The Tuatha de Danaan rarely saw this much action in one day—and with its operational commander gone and supreme commander in grave danger, the situation was all the more daunting.

"We really don't have enough manpower," Mao determined.

Sousuke hung his head, feeling guilty for having failed to protect Kaname. "I'm sorry."

"Don't get the wrong idea, Sousuke. There are limits to what one man can do. Look at the facts: They were systematic and heavily armed, and you had three pieces of luggage. You'd have to be James Bond to beat those odds, really."

Struck by the unexpected sentiment, Sousuke watched Mao stretch out on the hood of the truck. He didn't really know a lot about Melissa Mao. Supposedly, she was in her mid-twenties; she looked a little younger than that, though. Her large, slanted eyes resembled those of a cat. And although her short black hair gave her a bold look, she usually appeared very graceful. She always had that sense about her, however, that she might've been a wild child when she was a little girl.

Hailing from New York, Mao was a Chinese-American who came into Mithril after serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. Although most armies didn't allow women to fight on the front lines, Mao

certainly had acquired combat experience before joining Mithril, because Mithril wouldn't enlist anyone who hadn't. Whatever her story was, it surely was a good one.

In terms of combat ability, she was a good match for Sousuke. She had a specialist's knowledge of electronic warfare and AS operation. And she also had advanced people skills and keen judgment, which is why she was the team leader.

From time to time, Mao made indirect conjectures about Sousuke, such as the one she'd just made. Half the time, Sousuke didn't notice. More than likely, Mao's behavior came from the natural sense of responsibility that came with being team leader. That was the kind of woman Mao was.

"We can't count on much support, so we'll have to work out something ourselves. Pursuit, surveillance, conquest?"

"I guess that's all we *can* do," Kurz complained, yawning.

"What's with the lethargic attitude?" Mao demanded.

"It's not like that," Kurz protested.

"Kaname's in danger here. She saved your life, remember?"

"I know that. That's why I'm tolerating this, even though I should be sleeping. If it weren't Kaname and Tessa, I'd be drinking myself to sleep right now. No joke."

"Prick," stated Mao.

"Say, what's the big deal with this Takuma kid, anyway?" Kurz suddenly appeared wide awake. "Does he do tricks? Maybe drink vodka with his ass and breathe fire? Does he pull coins out of his nose or what?"

"I don't want to fight any terrorists that are desperate to get a guy like that back," Mao declared.

"I was kidding," Kurz explained.

"If you weren't, you'd be wrong."

Kurz folded his arms, not listening. "Seriously, though, I bet Takuma's the same as Kaname. You know, one of the Whispereds."

"Ah, yes . . ." Mao pondered this.

"The colonel knew more than she said," Sousuke offered. "I get the feeling Takuma's different from Kaname. He's more alien."

"What are you basing that on, Sousuke?"

"A hunch."

"That's the first time you've had a 'hunch.' It's refreshing . . . yet creepy."

"Leave me alone."

Ring! Their wireless headsets signaled a transmission from the nearby M9.

"There we go." Mao licked her lips. "What is it, Friday?" Friday was the name of her mech's Artificial Intelligence.

"Master Sergeant, there is information on item B3 from the Tuatha de Danaan. Fifty seconds ago, the police surveillance system discovered a corresponding vehicle."

The vehicle Friday referred to was most likely the black van Sousuke had spotted while escaping the apartment complex. A police traffic camera had captured a corresponding image, and Mithril frequently broke into police and military computer systems to retrieve information.

"Location?" Mao asked.

"On the Metropolitan Expressway II in Koto," answered the computer, "currently crossing the Rainbow Bridge en route to Daiba."

"Very good. Tighten the net and continue surveillance. If it shows up in the area, let us know."

"What's in it for me?" Friday asked.

"Candy."

"Roger," Friday said, and then he went quiet.

"What kind of weird stuff are you teaching him?" Kurz asked.

"What's it to you? It's my AI," Mao replied. "Now, we know their general heading."

"Seems like a harbor."

"Probably. If they don't pop up on any nearby roads, then they're headed somewhere near Odaiba. If we go there—"

"We'll find her transmitter."

"Exactly."

The terrorists weren't the only ones who used electromagnetic transmitters to keep tabs on people. Because Kaname lived in constant danger of abduction, she always wore a necklace with an ultra-small transmitter inside it. Mithril applied many other measures to protect her; this was the only one she herself was aware of.

If the enemy were to notice her necklace, it already would be too late, because Mao, Kurz, and Sousuke knew they were in the coastal area at this stage, meaning all they had to do was call in the de Danaan's mother AI to complete an ultra high-speed scan of warehouses and docked ships in the area to find their objective.

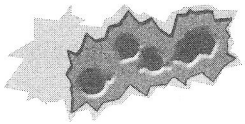
"I'll go in the M9; you two, take the truck," decided Mao. "I'll update you with the rendezvous point later. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

"Sure thing."

"Good. Then, commence counteroffensive."

Nimbly, Mao leapt off the hood of the truck.



June 27, 00:25 (Japan Standard Time)
Minato, Tokyo, Japan
Metropolitan Expressway 11

After crossing Rainbow Bridge, the van carrying Kaname and Tessa came to the Ariake interchange and exited the expressway. For a Friday night, traffic was relatively light.

Although four years had passed since the World City Expo Tokyo '96 had ended in a yawning deficit, the metropolitan, coastal sub-center still continued to develop. Large office buildings and shopping centers scattered here and there made the numerous weed-infested vacant lots much more conspicuous.

Takuma rode in the passenger seat, and a man with a large gun sat beside Tessa and Kaname. The terrorists weren't taking any chances.

Gloomily, Tessa's head sagged, giving her profile a feeble and pathetic look. At times, her body stiffened temporarily, as though she were enduring something. She grabbed the end of her braid and poked at her mouth with it.

Oh, Sousuke . . . thought Kaname. When Sousuke called for Tessa's release during the hostage situation, it definitely had come as a surprise. Kaname had wanted him to save her; when he hadn't, it confirmed her suspicion that Tessa came first.

Is she really more important to him? Or did he trust me to get away? Which was it? It hurt her not to know the answer.

Kaname recalled losing sight of Sousuke when the water fountain blew up. She wanted to believe he was okay. Her hopefulness encouraged her: *Good,* she thought, *at least I don't totally hate him. That's probably the most important thing right now.* She believed their bond was indestructible, even at a time like this.

Destined for a lonesome wharf, the van blew past Daiba and went south, into a faint orange glow, through which they could scarcely make out warehouses, bridge cranes, and silo-shaped depots.

The van went through a distribution center's gate, into a deserted area. It crept along an unused road lined with old containers that concealed the van.

After turning a few corners, the pier came into view. There was a freighter moored there. Although it was more than three hundred feet long, the ship didn't seem unusually large. As the van pulled closer to the rusty hull, the ship's name came into view: George Clinton.

A light shining out from the cabin suggested people already were inside.

The van stopped in front of a gangway to the deck. The men in the van ushered Kaname and Tessa out of the van and onto the freighter. There was one woman waiting for them on the deck. She wore an orange suit—which, Kaname knew from experience, was for piloting an AS.

"Takuma," said the woman.

"Sis, you wouldn't believe the day I've had," he answered in a voice more cheerful than Kaname or Tessa possibly could have expected.

The woman responded by slapping him. Hard. He staggered.

"Sis?" he put his hand on his reddening cheek.

"Why didn't you take your medicine on the plane?"

"I'm sorry. I felt terrible, so I threw it away in the bathroom."

"That's why you were captured. We lost four people getting you back: Oi, Ueda, Yashiro, and Hatano. Did you know that?"

"Oi and the others never listened to you, and they always made fun of me. They were cowards who—"

She slapped his other cheek. "Who died trying to rescue you."

"I . . . I'm sorry." He stole a glance at Tessa, perhaps not wanting her to see him like this. She looked away, anyway, in disgust, as if she were looking into a mirror at her own flaws.

"Despic-c-cable." Kaname thought she heard someone murmur. *What was that?* She looked for the source of the voice, but no one appeared to be speaking. It felt like Tessa's voice, but Tessa kept her mouth tightly closed.

"D-d-diff—I'm different," the voice reappeared. For a moment, Kaname wondered if maybe she herself had said it, and she put her hand to her mouth to make sure it wasn't moving. No, it wasn't her. No one noticed Kaname's strange behavior.

The voice came from farther away. Or was it extremely close? Kaname didn't understand, but the voice did not persist.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're back," the woman said, icily embracing Takuma.

To the outside observer, her face and body movements seemed mismatched, and something felt very wrong about their sibling relationship.

"I was worried—worried sick that they might figure out what you're worth and hurt you."

"Sis . . ."

"Did you take your medicine?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Then, go below and rest. You have things to do."

"Okay, I will."

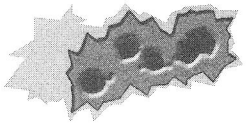
With one of the men in tow, Takuma descended below the deck.

"Now, you two," Seina said, turning to Tessa and Kaname, "Know why we let you live?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Kaname blurted, searching her mind for a good retort. "Bad guys always spill their master plans right before they get foiled. That's as old school as it gets."

"You're dumber than you look," Seina said without smiling. She turned around. "Take them with you, and see to his debriefing, too."

The men with guns nodded and prodded Kaname and Tessa down a flight of stairs, through a rusty passageway, and into a dreary cabin.



June 27, 01:10 (Japan Standard Time)
Minato, Tokyo, Japan
Metropolitan Expressway, Inner Circular Route

"So, you ended up choosing to save Tessa first, huh?" Kurz asked, without taking his eye off the road.

He steered the vehicle with the fingertips of his right hand; a can of Ito En tea occupied his left hand. Despite that they were in a used truck, he was able to coax some speed out of it, skillfully passing taxis and semis.

"That's correct," Sousuke answered.

Sousuke stared blankly out the window as lights whizzed past in various patterns and colors. Taillight red, streetlight orange, and neon green swirled together, reflecting on the two faces in his mind's eye.

"I think I was foolish."

"I think you still are," Kurz joked.

"It's very discomforting to hear that, coming from you."

"Let me revel in this moment. It's not often that *I* get to call *you* a fool."

After a moment of sulking, Sousuke sighed. "What would you have done in that situation? Who would've you put first, Kaname or the colonel?"

"Let's see . . . I probably would've picked the girl I like more—the nice one who would repay me with some sweet burning love, because that's what important."

That statement really spoke volumes about Kurz.

Kurz was around twenty years old. He had blond hair, blue eyes, a slender chin, and indisputably beautiful features. However, he had no dignity. He greatly disliked rules and anything that required serious effort, and he lacked seriousness toward his duty.

Somehow, however, his combat ability was on par with Sousuke's, which made him even more unmanageable. Kurz was a genius with a sniper rifle, better than Sousuke. He could put a hole in a coin from a half mile away while singing a song.

Like Sousuke, Kurz had no formal military experience, instead coming from a mercenary group. Actually, Kurz never mentioned where he'd trained or fought, but he frequently had mentioned formerly living in Japan.

Kurz rarely grew quiet; however, the mention of his past invariably turned his cheerful demeanor sour. Many times, Sousuke saw Kurz's face clouded by sorrow. Usually, he would shrug, saying, "Nothing happened worth mentioning."

While driving the truck, however, Kurz wore a mask of frivolity, mostly because he knew it aggravated Sousuke.

"Nonsense." Sousuke furrowed his brow. "It isn't a question of liking anyone. I'm talking about making the most efficient choice."

"That's why you're a fool," Kurz chuckled. "If you ask me, it really didn't matter which one you chose. In the end, the outcome would've been the same, either way."

"But—"

"You have to trust your instincts, man—or call it 'inspiration,' if you want. I mean, trying to calculate everything is impossible."

Sousuke stared for a moment.

"Do you honestly think you can make everyone happy? That's sounds like the foundation of a creepy harem fantasy. Well, rock on, *amigo*. I have your back on that one. You go for it, Sagara."

"I shouldn't have asked," Sousuke pouted, causing Kurz's smile to broaden.

"Well, when I said it's just like you, I meant it."

The wireless radio chirped.

"Urzu Two to Urzu Six and Seven," said Mao from the M9. "Things are getting worse."

"Say what, girl?"

"The self-defense force and police mobilized. Apparently, they've located our 'friends' first."

"And that's bad because . . . ?"

"Patrol cars are going to scream up to the wharf with the sirens blaring. There's no hope for a surprise attack now, meaning Tessa and Kaname are in danger."

"Dammit."

"Can you divert them?" Sousuke hoped.

"I'll try to hack in and issue a fake order; at best, that'll buy us only a little more time, though. So, hurry up."

"Roger. Shit!"

Tossing the tea over his shoulder, Kurz gripped the wheel with both hands and stomped on the accelerator.



CHAPTER 4
Fuse of Destruction

June 27, 01:10 (Japan Standard Time)
Akami Wharf, Koto, Tokyo, Japan
The George Clinton

The cabin of the freighter had been abandoned long ago. Its lockers all were empty, the bunk bed mattresses were bare, and the old CRT TV in the corner didn't have any power.

They have Takuma, Tessa fretted, unable to shake the feelings of powerlessness and anxiety. Now that the terrorists had recovered Takuma, they could activate a weapon with the Lambda Driver at any time.

I have to do something, she thought, *but what?* Nearby, she knew that her captors were preparing to launch a dreadful terrorist attack.

She had been a fool, erring in judgment and making multiple mistakes along the way. And because of her, Sousuke was . . .

From the bed, Tessa caught a glimpse of Kaname investigating various furniture fixtures. While Kaname came to the conclusion that there was nothing of use, Tessa stared blankly at the wall. Eventually, Kaname sat down on the bed opposite Tessa.

An awkward silence ensued.

"Miss Chidori," Tessa finally said.

"What?"

"You are most unusual."

"I think I'm pretty normal," she answered, looking at the ceiling.

"Oh no. You aren't *supposed* to be a *normal* person. But now, on top of that, you're looking for a way out of here; you provoked that woman; and back at the school, you pounced on him—on Takuma."

Presented with this list, Kaname had to admit she really hadn't been acting like an ordinary person.

"So, I'm weird?"

"Yes, I . . ." Tessa cut herself off and took a moment to gather her courage. "For some reason, I feel disjointed around you. Today, I've repeatedly done stupid things I normally wouldn't. I've been mean, I've caused trouble for my subordinate, and I've exhibited meaningless acting power."

"'Acting power'? What does that mean?" Kaname asked.

"At the school, I ignored Sergeant Sagara's instructions and rushed into the fray. I've never made such an irrational decision in my whole life. Trying to save you from your harebrained scuffle made a fool out of me, as well."

Staring blankly, Kaname didn't take particular offense at being called 'harebrained.' "Um, okay. Why'd you do it, then?"

"Well . . ." Tessa hesitated.

Why had she run to save Kaname? Why did she do it, when she knew that it was an injurious act, not to mention pointless one? Because she had been mortified. She desperately wanted to prove to Sousuke that she was not totally useless.

She knew that the reason Sousuke had called for her release first was that he had confidence in Kaname. Or conversely, he was distinctly *not confident* in Tessa. In hindsight, however, considering her athletic ability (or lack thereof), maybe he had been right.

Regardless, why place more confidence in this girl than in Tessa?

Tessa's logical reasoning skills proposed many answers, but her emotions rejected them all. It was a feeling she could not control due to her inexperience dealing with it.

This was all very aberrant for Tessa. She was a better person than this, and she *should* be able to get along with this girl. She wanted to—after all, she felt no ill will toward Kaname.

Am I really so unpleasant? she wondered somberly. Catching a glimpse of her self-righteous side, she instantly felt pangs of great self-loathing.

She definitely wanted to know what kind of person Kaname Chidori was.

Obviously, Kaname was someone a soldier like Sousuke Sagara could trust. She was an ordinary person, yet incredibly strong-willed. She was unpredictable, reckless at times.

In this situation, an ordinary girl might simply shudder and cry. Without ever telling Kaname why she thought she was weird, Tessa said, "You certainly are unusual. Aren't you scared?"

"I don't know." Kaname took a moment to sort it out. "I mean, of course I'm scared. I guess, when something like that happens, it makes me want to fight back."

"Fight back?"

"Yeah. When someone tries to humiliate me or challenges me, I really consider them an enemy. I'm not just talking about those guys with guns, either. There are enemies in everyday life, too."

Kaname had made enemies of homework, morning drowsiness, nighttime loneliness, mean people, and even her once-a-month pains. She also battled her anxiety about the future and her fear of being jilted.

"If an 'enemy' like that attacks you, you can either put up with it or fight back. That's how I see it, at least."

"Daily troubles are not in the same league as *this*," Tessa pointed out.

"True. I think it's odd, too. I don't know where you come from, but even leading a normal life in Japan, sometimes bad things happen that make you wish you were dead, instead."

"They do?" Tessa asked, taken aback.

"They do, indeed," said Kaname, leaning back against the wall. "Here's an example, from my middle school years: I had come back to Japan from New York, where I was living because of my parents. Anyway, I came back to Japan and transferred to a local middle school. What happened next is common, I guess. In New York, I had picked up the habit of saying exactly what I meant; apparently, my classmates didn't like that."

Tessa formulated a guess at what that meant.

"And sometimes, I'm sure I was to blame. Regardless, being treated like that . . . it was the worst. I wanted to die," she finished the story in the voice of a person who was dead already.

"And you fought that, too?"

"That's right," Kaname replied without any trace of fighting spirit. "It wasn't the best way to go about it, though. I'd be lying if I said I don't regret it. Maybe it would've been smarter to run away. I think I learned a lot from it, though."

"Like what?"

"Oh, a lot of things," Kaname dodged. "When I entered high school, everything changed. I'm happy enough with the way things are now. The other people are mostly nice, the school is laid back, and I have good friends. Although I can't help thinking I'd be happier if Sousuke would calm down a tad. Ha ha."

After Kaname's confession, Tessa finally felt as if she could permit herself to like Kaname—a little bit, at least.

"Is Mister Sagara that much of an annoyance?"

"He's terrible! He has less than zero common sense, so he's *always* getting into trouble. I know he doesn't do it on purpose, but sometimes that makes it more of a pain in the butt." Kaname's eyes narrowed, although she did not appear to be annoyed. "He's awkward, but he tries really hard. For some reason, I can't leave him alone."

Awkward. Tries really hard. Can't leave him alone. There it was. That was exactly how Tessa viewed him. She thought about

how Sousuke tried to comfort her about Kalinin by explaining that he'd failed to kill the lieutenant commander. It was a terrible way to console someone, yet it was all Sousuke could offer.

He was funny, cute, and trustworthy.

Sousuke's face—seemingly cool, but actually desperate—made Tessa feel a sense of longing. She wanted to be around him and his tactlessness all the time. And yet, Kaname was always there.

That was it. Tessa finally understood why Kaname irked her.

"True," Tessa mumbled. "Mister Sagara certainly is a strange guy."

"I'll say. *Very* strange."

For a moment, their eyes met, and they shared a complicit smile. For that instant, they were partners in emotion.

Tessa felt very relieved to realize that Kaname Chidori was not an alien. She was simply a girl, the same as Tessa.

"So, how about you?" Kaname asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You strike me as being pretty unusual yourself, Miss Testarossa."

"Please," she said, gathering her courage, "my friends call me Tessa."

"Okay, got it. Tessa. You can call me whatever you like."

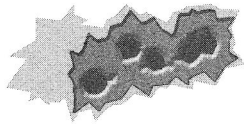
"Okay, Kaname." *That sounds about right,* Tessa thought.

"So, what do you do, Tessa? I mean, I know you're with Mithril and everything."

"Well, as I said before—"

The clunking sound of the door being unlocked interrupted Tessa; a moment later, a man poked in his head.

"Come with me, you two. Up and out."



A man in a black combat uniform entered Kalinin's room. He didn't have on a mask; still, Kalinin could hardly see the man's face beneath his dreadlocked hair.

"Questioning time, old man," the man announced insolently. Seina was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she had other things to attend to, or she no longer cared to see Kalinin.

"Time for the tearful reunion."

Two men pushed Teletha Testarossa and Kaname into the room. When they saw Kalinin stretched out on the bed, covered in bandages, the girls' reactions varied.

"Mister Kalinin!"

"Who's that?"

Kaname certainly seems okay. Looks like our "insurance policy" is working out, Kalinin decided.

Although this was the first time Kaname Chidori had seen Kalinin, it was not the first time he'd seen her; he'd visited her in the Tuatha de Danaan's infirmary two months ago, while she was unconscious. Of course, she did not remember that.

"Kalinin, huh?" repeated the guy with the dreads. "Good name, old man. Cheers!"

He made a sign to his buddies, and they grabbed Tessa and Kaname by the shoulders and forced them to their knees.

"Now, then. According to Seina, it doesn't make sense to torture you, seeing as you're nearly toast, anyway. But maybe these girls will cooperate with us. Dig?"

Kalinin remained a stone.

"Let me warn you: I *enjoy* this. It's why I grew up in juvey."

"Seriously, old man," interjected the man behind Kaname. "This guy's a super perv. In middle school, he took this one office lady into the woods. Five, six shots to the face, and she was—"

"Stop it, you're embarrassing him," said the third man.

The three of them laughed, and the two girls looked down in disgust.

This was supposed to be a terrorist group, not a boys' club for perverted criminals. The men's faces changed back to those of soldiers, losing all the playfulness they'd had as boisterous sex offenders, and the men pulled out their pistols.

"Tell us," the dreadlocked man began, pressing the gun to Tessa's head, "who you respresent?"

Tessa didn't even blink. "Don't say anything, Mister Kalinin," she ordered.

"I'll make that decision, Testarossa," he said slightly bitterly, attempting to conceal the fact that she was more important than he was. If they found out she was not merely his secretary, they probably would torture her directly.

"Since when do you give me orders?" Tessa demanded, refusing to let Kalinin handle things.

"Quit babbling, you guys, and give us some answers. Who do you represent? In case you don't think we're serious . . ." Dreads pointed the gun at Tessa's leg, obviously prepared to shoot her.

"Mithril," Kalinin said before the man had an opportunity to pull the trigger.

"What the hell is that?" the man asked, without moving the gun.

Kalinin sighed. During the ensuing explanation, he hesitated several times, gasping in agony; the wounds on his back felt like they were on fire.

"It's a military organization established to stave off regional conflicts and diffuse terrorism. We offer information and train against militaries and police forces from many nations. When it's necessary, we undertake physical operations. I'm based out of the strategic division, frequently exchanging information with Japanese government officials."

"Poor guy. Those are some pretty nasty wounds you've got there," noted the dreadlocked man without a shred of sympathy. He turned to his cohorts. "You guys ever heard of Mithril?"

"Heard rumors, like they're this super bad-ass punishment squad that isn't affiliated with any military anywhere," replied one of the goons.

"That," Kalinin gasped, "is a rumor we spread intentionally, to help contain terrorism."

"What a load of crap! Honestly, who'd be scared of a rumor like that? Okay, question two."

For a change of pace, he pointed the gun at Kaname's leg. Completely pallid, she stared at the shiny barrel in front of her. Her eyes moistened a little; aside from that, she didn't appear agitated.

She's a strong girl, Kalinin thought.

"How much do you know about the Lambda Driver? Do you know a way to stop it?"

"Well . . ."

"I'll shoot," he threatened.

"I'll talk. The Lambda Driver. We . . . we . . ." Kalinin's voice faded, and the only thing he could think about was that his back and ribs hurt like hell.

"Speak up, I can't hear you," he walked closer to Kalinin. "'We' what?"

"We possess . . . technology."

"Technology?"

"Technology that doesn't . . . exist."

"If you don't start making sense, I'll shoot the bitch."

Kalinin clutched his throat, and his mouth opened and closed, like a fish's. The goons all frowned.

"Looks bad, man. Dude's dyin'."

"Shut up. He'll talk before he croaks. Old man, if you don't tell us everything, I'm gonna make that bitch squeal, catch my drift?"

The man grasped Kalinin by his limp neck. He stooped, leaning close so he could hear Kalinin's response to his question: "What we want to know is—"

That'll have to do. Snapping out of his shameful display, Kalinin easily grabbed and twisted the wrist of the man's gun hand.

"Oh!"

Kalinin did not give him any time to react. While the man still gripped the pistol, Kalinin turned it toward the man's abdomen and fired. Three quick gunshots penetrated the man's body, drawing three red lines through the air.

It took the men behind Tessa and Kaname several moments to process these events.

Would they fire at Kalinin, despite the danger of shooting their own man? Would they use the girls as human shields? Or would they escape through the doorway behind them? Although they had three choices, they hesitated long enough that Kalinin gave them no options at all.

From his position on the bed, Kalinin fired two rounds. Quick, accurate, machinelike, he put a bullet through each man's head, as

calmly as a carpenter strikes a nail. Before they had time to react, the men crumpled.

Smoke rose from the barrel of the gun, and the empty cartridges clacked to the floor.

Both Tessa and Kaname stared in wide-eyed amazement at the man pointing the gun.

"I'm glad you're unharmed, Colonel," Kalinin said in his usual tone.

"Mister Kalinin. What about your injuries?"

"Not life-threatening. I may need a rest, however, once this is over."

Braving the violent pain, he sat up, directing the gun toward the handcuffs on his ankle. He fired, sparks flew, and the chain burst apart. His body loudly protested all this activity, but he knew he could trick it into use for a little while.

He noticed Kaname, who still seemed confused.

"Kaname Chidori," he said as he searched the corpses' equipment.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for taking care of my subordinate," he said.

"Oh, um, sure. I just met Tessa today, though."

"Not her," he clarified, thrusting the dead men's knives and ammunition into his belt.

"He's talking about Mister Sagara, Kaname," explained Tessa.

"Oh? But—"

"The Colonel is my superior officer, not my subordinate," Kalinin said, rising. "Let's get out of here."

He's serious, Kaname determined, finally accepting it. This Kalinin guy ranked higher than Sousuke, and Kalinin called Tessa *his* superior officer. He spoke with reverence toward Tessa and called her "colonel." In other words, the klutzy girl actually *was* at the top of the totem pole.

In that case, Sousuke's explanation was true. He hadn't lied, after all. Teletha Testarossa was the head honcho—a ship's captain, a colonel, a commander.

"This is really weird," Kaname muttered as she followed Tessa down the corridor. "What kind of organization is Mithril, anyway? First, you send a war nut with no common sense to high school; then, you put a girl who hardly can walk without falling on her face in charge of a submarine? I don't get it."

"When you put it that way . . ." Tessa began, souring.

"It is painful to hear," Kalinin finished with a hint of dry humor.

The corridor of the freighter was dim and cramped. Kalinin, classifiably large, looked as though he might hit his head on the overhead pipes at any moment. Multiple layers of bandages swirled

around the inverted triangle of his back, and they were stained brown with coagulated blood. He looked like a wreck, yet he carried himself smoothly, without a single trace of awkwardness.

He walks a lot like Sousuke, Kaname realized suddenly. Before she could give it much more thought, Kalinin halted.

"What is it?" whispered Tessa.

"Don't speak. This way." Kalinin prodded Tessa and Kaname through a nearby iron door, into a confined latrine with a potently vile odor—a mixture of oil, salt, and excrement.

Reflexively, Kaname gagged and started to yell out, but Kalinin put his hand over her mouth.

He quietly closed the door and held his breath. There were footsteps in the corridor as a number of men ran past. Apparently, Kalinin had overdone it a little with the gunfire. "It seems they noticed our escape."

"It was only a matter of time," Tessa began, struggling to cope with the stench. "What bothers me more is . . ." She paused to gag on the stench.

"The cargo of this ship?" inquired Kalinin.

"Yes. Earlier, I heard the sound of a large-scale gas turbine engine, which was not for aircraft use."

"A generator?"

"Probably. That's what the torque converter sounded like. I don't understand, though—it sounded way too large to be an AS generator."

"You think it has to do with a Lambda Driver?"

"I can't say for sure," she admitted. "It must be for machinery that requires extra power, though. Now that Takuma's back in their hands, we have to do something."

Kaname's head whipped back and forth as she attempted to make sense of the conversation. "What are you guys talking about?"

Tessa seemed slightly irritated at the interruption; however, she quickly regained her composure. "Basically, this ship might be carrying a very powerful weapon—a weapon that uses technology beyond the parameters of common sense."

"Huh?"

"You don't understand?"

"No, not really."

"I figured as much."

Ignoring Kaname's glare, Tessa put her hand to her chin. "Guessing will get us nowhere. Mister Kalinin, I want to try to get a look at what's in the hold. Is that doable?"

"That's probably the only thing we *can* do. If they have an AS with a Lambda Driver, we need to destroy it before it mobilizes."

"Then, let's go. Sound good, Kaname? May we take a little detour?"

"Um, sure. Fine by me."

Honestly, Kaname wanted nothing more than to get off the ship as soon as possible; however, she was in no position to say so. Even to her untrained eyes, Kalinin appeared to be a hardened veteran. And Tessa seemed like a different person now that she was in charge and speaking nearly exclusively in jargon.

After peeking into the hallway, Kalinin led the way out. They passed through several doors and descended a set of stairs. Another passageway eventually led to a large open space.

The ship's cargo hold resembled a school gym in size and shape. Slender iron catwalks cut across the middle of the towering walls. If it were empty, it probably would make a great place to hold a basketball game.

There were no people around, but the room was full of the irritating smell of metal, fuel, and burnt plastic.

The dim light that came through the portholes cast shadows of machines of various sizes and shapes. They could make out a small

crane, compressors, a large battery, and some kind of tank. Countless cables and pipes littered the floor.

In the center of the hold—or, to be more accurate, taking up the entire space—a gigantic machine *crouched.*

At first, Kaname thought it was an enormous submarine; however, the shape was too complex. It didn't look like an AS, though. For one thing, it was probably ten times larger than any AS. It was so big that they couldn't see the whole thing from where they stood.

Kaname couldn't decide if it was meant for water, air, or land.

Its smooth, curved exterior might have been armor. The red machine comprised extremely complex parts, and it had a pair of absurdly large arms.

"What is that?" Kaname asked.

Frozen with shock and awe, Tessa gaped for a moment before muttering her reply. "It's ridiculous. If something like this activates, there's nothing we can do. A lot of people will die. We have to stop it."

"A hand grenade wouldn't so much as scratch it," Kalinin pointed out.

"There should be a fuel tank. If we can—"

The room's mercury lamps all came on at once, filling the large space with light. Spotting several figures on the catwalk, Kalinin

angled himself to shield Kaname and Tessa from the men's rifles and shotguns. Then, Kalinin spotted men on the opposite pathway, as well. And now, there were two in the entrance behind them. They were completely surrounded.

They caught a glimpse of a familiar face overhead: Takuma, now clad in an AS operator suit. It surprised Kaname to see him like that. *The baby-faced kid's gonna fight?*

Kaname knew the tremendous agility and destructive power of Arm Slaves and couldn't envision Takuma in the pilot's seat.

"I knew you'd come here," Takuma sneered. "You have a lot of strong friends, Miss Testarossa: Mister Yang, Mister Sagara, and this injured gentleman here. You do jump from man to man pretty quickly."

"I see they haven't found a cure for cynicism yet," Tessa replied.

Takuma smiled and gazed at the giant machine. "So, what do you guys think? We call it 'Behemoth.'" He sounded almost indifferent.

"You people are insane," Tessa commented. "There's no strategic objective for a machine like that—its only use is mass destruction. Like nuclear and chemical weapons, it serves to do nothing more than propagate fear."

"Well, that *is* our objective, Miss Testarossa."

Tessa glared.

"Personally, I don't get anything out of using this. It's just an expression, an assertion, that's all. In a year, everyone probably will forget about it."

"Like they forgot about Seiji Takechi?" Kalinin asked, surprising Takuma and the other goons.

"Yes, that's right," Takuma agreed after a short pause. "True, we cannot forgive a world that denied the only father we've ever known. That's not the sole reason, though. You probably don't know what this feels like."

"No, I don't. However, I do know that a machine like this has no practical use. I wouldn't use it."

"Not true. I am the chosen soldier. When I pilot this thing, it will be invincible. I'll break and kill an extraordinary number of things, making my sister happy. Then, I'll be satisfied."

Takuma leaned against the rail and grinned. He was not malicious, nor wicked, and that fact made his expression much more ominous.

"If you'll excuse us, we have to hurry up and finish getting ready. It looks like the police are on their way over, and they've called in some AS backup. We won't be needing you anymore, now that you know it's futile to fight back against Behemoth."

"Stop it, Takuma," Tessa requested. "It isn't too late."

"Yes, it is, Miss Testarossa. Although I was fond of you, this is goodbye."

The men aimed their guns.

We're about to get shot. Right as the thought flashed through Kaname's mind, a thunderous roar echoed through the cargo hold. It was an explosion that shook the hull violently in all directions.

The blast occurred somewhere in the freighter, probably near the bottom, as if the boat had been hit by a torpedo.

When the whole boat lurched to the left, equipment slipped and tumbled, and the gunmen on the catwalk lost their balance and clung to the railing.

"Augh!" Kaname tumbled to the floor, rolling into a lower-back collision with the small crane.

"Take cover!" shouted Kalinin to Kaname. He ran as though carrying Tessa.

Kaname caught sight of a shadow wielding a gun above. *I'll get shot if I stay here.*

Before she could decide what to do, her body made the decision for her, leaping out of the way in a move that could've been described as either a crawl or a roll.

"Whoa!"

Gunfire flew mercilessly. As it rained bullets and sparks, Kaname took refuge behind a nearby compressor.

A real gun battle broke out—doubtless, Kalinin was shooting back. He and Tessa were on the opposite side of the cargo hold, making meeting back up with them impossible.

As the ship swayed to and fro, bullets flew everywhere. Fear and helplessness assaulted Kaname as if she were an astronaut whose lifeline had broken loose during a spacewalk. She didn't have a weapon or a place to run. What was she supposed to do?

What do I do? Wh-wha-whadda I d-d-do? Wha?

Although her heartbeat was practically deafening, Kaname heard a strange voice mumbling inside her head: "Are you . . . okay? Ok-k-kay? We'll all be safe soon. Soon. They're coming."

Huh? Again?

Bullets struck the ground nearby, and the voice stopped.

It wouldn't do for Kaname to stay put.

Running along the wall, Kaname stumbled on the cables crisscrossing the floor and struck an iron pole that nearly knocked her unconscious. It didn't help that the ship continued to rock. Somehow, Kaname avoided the gunfire long enough to hide behind a toolbox the size of a desk.

"Why are they all shooting at *me?*" she shouted tearfully.

As if in response, one of the masked soldiers climbed over a machine and approached Kaname. He probably knew that she didn't have a weapon. Perhaps he wanted to kill her at close range, instead of trying to hit her from a long way away while she scrambled around.

Kalinin and Tessa were on the far side of the room, in no position to help her, apparently.

If Kaname ran, she knew she would be shot in the back. Desperate, she reached into the toolbox and extracted a large wrench.

"Son of a . . ." she heaved the wrench with all her might.

The wrench hit the man's shoulder, causing him to falter momentarily. He bent over.

"There's more where that came from!" Kaname grabbed a crowbar as big as her arm. Staggering under its weight, she charged at the man—who, for whatever reason, did not fire his gun. He shook a hand back and forth, almost as if calling for mercy.

"Take this!"

She swung the crowbar. The masked man barely managed to stick his rifle in the way of the attack, and he couldn't stop its momentum. The crowbar struck him in the neck; he staggered, yet he seemed quite tenacious.

"Damn you!" She screeched, attacking again. He blocked with the rifle, and it was destroyed. He dropped it and fell backward, hitting an iron pole.

"You want some more of this?" she shouted. Her legs trembled, and she was scared to the verge of tears. She couldn't afford to think about that, though.

The man raised his hands in surrender. "You really are full of surprises. . . ."

"What?"

"It's me, Chidori," he said, taking off his mask.

When Kaname saw his face in the semi-darkness, she dropped the crowbar. "Sousuke?"

In spite of their reunion, the gunfight continued on the other side of the cargo hold. The ricochets reverberated loud enough to make Kaname's head pound. It was no time to relax because she could be shot from any side. Regardless, she dove into Sousuke's chest.

Instinct, not rationality, drove her to do this. On top of the fact that she was scared, she was extremely happy that Sousuke wasn't dead. If he could show up at a crucial time like this, then she wouldn't hold a grudge. In any case, she needed to cling to something.

"Chidori?" he asked, confused.



"I was so scared," she said, stifling sobs.

"Sorry."

"And so worried."

"Sorry for that, too."

"You jerk, I nearly died several times—"

Quickly pointing his gun upward, Sousuke interrupted her with two quick shots. Somewhere, a man screamed and fell from one of the catwalks with a sickening thud.

Sousuke held Kaname once again. "Sorry. Please continue."

She blinked for a moment and then pulled away from Sousuke. "This really isn't the time for this kind of thing."

"Hm. Good point."

Hastily, they took cover.

"How'd you get here?"

"We found it quickly and attacked from the sea."

"Did you see what caused all the shaking? It sounded like a huge explosion."

"Yeah," Sousuke nodded. "We rigged a bomb when it looked like they had you cornered. We rushed the explosion, so the ship probably will sink soon."

"You didn't really think it through, did you?"

"In addition to confusing the enemy, it'll destroy their equipment. Thus, it was effective." That was true, provided they made it off the boat.

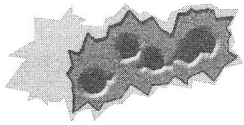
"You said 'we.' Who's with you?"

"Mao and Kurz."

"Oh, no wonder." Kaname knew them and also knew they were very skilled, like Sousuke.

"Let's run for it. The enemy won't be able to focus on us."

He grabbed Kaname by the hand and broke into a sprint.



When the ship sagged to one side, Takuma smashed shoulder first into the wall.

"Ugh!"

His temple struck next. He staggered and gripped the railing. Gunfire still rang sporadically from the opposite side of the room.

Realizing the ship was sinking, he turned pessimistic. *We can't fire up Behemoth now. I've blown my chance to get into it, to move it, to demonstrate its power. Why did I ever . . . sister.*

His head throbbed and bled; he must've cut it when he'd hit the wall. There wasn't much blood, at least. *Red blood. My blood. It hurts.*

"Takuma." Seina and another man ran along one of the catwalks.

"Sis?"

"What are you doing? Hurry up and get to the cockpit. We have to start Behemoth."

"We can't do it now," he whined. "Besides, I'm injured."

"Stop complaining over that tiny little cut. It won't stop you from operating the mech."

"It hurts."

She grabbed him by the nape of the neck and dragged him. He squawked.

"You don't have a choice. You're going to make it go. Protect the Behemoth."

"But, sis, I . . ." *Aren't you worried about me? I'm injured. Is Behemoth more important than I am? I wanted to pilot it to make you happy, and I put up with a lot of bad stuff. I don't care about Mister Takechi, I just felt bad for you. Sis . . .*

"Do you know how many people we've sacrificed for your sake?" Seina demanded.

I don't know.

"If you don't use that thing, then what good are you?"

Stop it. Don't say that.

"If you back out now, then I don't need you."

I thought you loved me, even if we didn't have Behemoth. You don't need me, though. Don't need me. I'm . . . nothing more than an operator. I'm part of the machine to her.

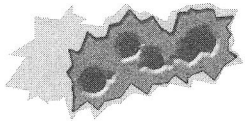
"Listen to me. You're going to pilot it, and you're going to let him help you. I'll make sure you have enough juice to start it up, but you have to move fast."

Completely unaware of the gaping hole she'd left in Takuma's heart, Seina slid down a ladder and ran to the other side of Behemoth.

The other man on the catwalk roughly slugged Takuma on the shoulder.

"What the hell are you waiting for? Move it, the ship's sinking."

At the man's urging, Takuma walked feebly toward the beastly machine.



After shaking the enemy, Sousuke and Kaname ran to the cargo hold's exit, where they encountered Kalinin and Tessa.

"Mister Sagara?" Tessa asked, obviously surprised.

"I apologize for the delay in our rescue operation."

After holding her breath for a moment, a look of joy started to overtake Tessa's little face, but she quickly reined it in. She looked ready to cling to his chest as Kaname had, but she repressed that urge as well. Averting her eyes, she stood up straight.

"I'm glad you are safe," she said with a tone of indifference, "And I am no longer angry about the events at the school."

"Yes, ma'am," Sousuke managed to say, staring blankly. "Thank you."

"What did you do, anyway, Sergeant Sagara?" asked Kalinin.

Although they both had thought the other was dead, neither had shown much sign of joy when discovering the other was safe. This happened a lot, actually.

"Well, sir, I . . ." Sousuke struggled to explain himself.

Kalinin shook it off. "Save it for later. Now, let's get these two out of here."

"Yes, sir. And you?"

Turning pale, Kalinin set his gaze on the ship's massive cargo. Anyone could tell Kalinin was exhausted, and his injuries were far from superficial.

"I still have things to do," he said cryptically. "Go on ahead."

"I'll stay, if you tell me what to do," offered Sousuke.

"No, that's okay."

Showing no more concern, Sousuke nodded.

Kalinin turned back to Tessa: "You have to escape, Colonel. I'll hinder the movement of that Behemoth thing."

"It's too dangerous. Besides, once this ship sinks, they won't be able to use it, anyway. You must—"

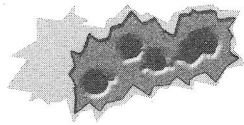
"It's a precaution. Don't worry, it if does start moving, I'll get out as quickly as I can."

Tessa saw that his mind was set, so she protested no more.

"See you later, then." After checking his remaining ammo, Kalinin disappeared back into the cargo hold.

"Let's get moving, Colonel."

Leading Kaname and Tessa down the passageway, Sousuke readied his gun.



The hull tilted severely, and the flood oozed into the hold.

"I told you to hurry up!" berated the soldier, practically dragging Takuma up the Behemoth's armor. "Are you going to do this or what?"

At the summit of the mountainous mech, Takuma pulled the lever next to his feet to initialize the cockpit hatch. High-pressure pneumatics slid open the outer layer of armor to reveal an inner layer, which gave way to the cockpit.

"It's all you now," shouted the man. Mercury lamps and steel pipes fell from the ceiling. "As far as I can tell, driving this beast is the only thing you're any good for, so don't screw it up. Show no mercy!"

Takuma stared.

"Come on! What's the right answer?" The man pushed Takuma's head, and the boy nodded slightly. "Dammit! What's wrong with you?"

Cursing, the man scrambled down the mech. Takuma pulled out a handgun, aimed at the man's back, and fired.

"Gah!" The man snapped bolt upright and turned around. With eyes the size of dinner plates, he watched Takuma squeeze off three more rounds. The man tumbled off Behemoth, his blood blending in with the mech's dark red paint.

"You can't talk to me like that!" spat Takuma. "Moron."

Takuma pulled out a syringe, easily located a vein, and jabbed the needle into his arm. He pressed the plunger and injected the liquid, completing the ritual.

I'll pilot this thing. What else can I do? I'm a part of Behemoth. The cockpit is the place I belong. After this is over . . . I don't know. Perhaps I'll give my body to this greedy beast and spread the flames of destruction.

"Don't move," commanded a voice behind Takuma.

The boy turned to see a heavily bandaged man wielding a handgun. It was one of Testarossa's men—one of the prisoners that had been kept aboard the ship.

"I can't let you do this. Walk over here slowly." Kalinin gestured with his free hand. Fatigue colored his bearded face, and his open wounds bled with the intensity of his every movement.

He might die even if I don't do anything, thought Takuma. "And if I say 'no'?"

"I will shoot and kill you."

"That could be a problem. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"Don't think I'll show you mercy because you're young."

If that were true, you already would've shot me instead of giving a warning—you poor codger, swimming in naïve sentimentality. That's why—

"Throw down your gun," Seina called from a catwalk thirty feet away. She kept a submachine gun trained on Kalinin.

You're not here to save me are you, sis? You simply want Behemoth to have its day, no matter the cost, huh?

"It's you," noted the man without lowering his weapon.

"I won't let you get in the way," she answered.

"You know, this machine won't change anything."

"How many times do I have to tell you? We're not interested in change."

"You're like a spoiled child."

"I don't want to shoot you, either."

As he listened to the conversation, Takuma felt an odd sense of déjà vu. Had he heard a conversation like this a long time ago? When was that?

"Then don't," Kalinin suggested. Near the limit of weariness, he put his strength into his right hand.

A split-second later, two gunshots overlapped.

Takuma felt a dull shock in his side. At first, it felt like someone had punched him, but that feeling quickly changed to one of intense agony. It took him a moment to realize he'd been shot.

In his peripheral, Takuma saw Kalinin fall forward and collapse as blood spurted from his back—Seina had hit her mark.

Grunting, Takuma crawled on top of Behemoth's armor and attempted to dive in the hatch.

Ever persistent, Kalinin mustered his last strength to level a shot at Takuma. Unexpectedly, though, the ship lurched heavily. Kalinin tumbled all the way to the floor, bouncing along the inclined armor.

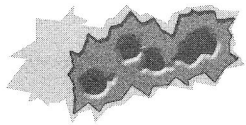
The hull creaked, and the catwalk snapped in half. Seina lost her balance and grasped the railing just before a ventilation duct fell on top of her. In one crushing instant, her body disappeared from view.

"Sis?"

Should I go help her? Wondered Takuma, instantly dismissing the idea. *She wouldn't want me to. Besides, I'm wounded. Even if I got out of Behemoth, I probably couldn't help her.*

The nihilistic pessimism that had eaten away at Takuma's conscience for so long told him his sister was dead. "Goodbye . . ."

There was only one thing left to do: Withstanding the sharp pain, Takuma slid into the cockpit.



Bemoaning its peril with an eerie roar, the ship shook.

"This way," directed Sousuke.

Tessa staggered and appeared about to fall several times. Grudgingly, Kaname supported her from the side.

Despite their performance back at the school, the two girls didn't strike Sousuke as particularly threatening—although he felt certain they would be bitter about his assessment.

I really don't get it. Had he chosen correctly? He would have to ask Kurz later.

When Sousuke turned a corner and ran toward a stairway, a man with a rifle popped up from a lower deck. Both men's eyes widened as they aimed their guns at the same time.

"Oops," said the slim blond man.

"Kurz?" mumbled Kaname.

"Mister Weber," acknowledged Tessa.

Smugly, Kurz smiled. "Yo, ladies, lookin' good. Give me some sugar."

"What are you rambling about?"

"Oh, nothing—just saying 'hello.'"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. You know, this tub's sinking faster than I expected. Let's skedaddle."

"Mm-hm."

As if responding to Kurz's assessment, the ship jerked in a new direction. They could hear water gushing through the lower levels.

"Did you overdo the explosives?" asked Sousuke.

"Not sure. That's not really my forte."

"First time I've heard you say that."

"I need beauty in my destruction. There must be focus and finesse. That's why I'm such a good sniper."

As she tried to follow the conversation, Kaname couldn't help feeling like she was in the audience of a really bizarre comedy act. But the conversation ended quickly enough, and before long, they had reached the ship's deck. Water crept toward the forward half of the ship. The stern already was submerged.

As the ship angled, containers on the deck collapsed and tumbled into the sea. A crane on the deck, which was ripped from its roots on the steadily inclining deck, came crashing down right next to Sousuke, Kurz, Kaname, and Tessa.

"Whoa, whoa! Watch out!" shrieked Kaname.

"Hurry."

Suddenly bending backward, the George Clinton's bow began to sink faster. As the deck twisted to and fro, it was no longer possible to walk steadily, and it took a Herculean effort to reach the ship's port side.

The gap between the ship's side and the surface of the pier looked jumpable . . . barely.

"See ya on the other side!" Kurz yelled, leaping nimbly to the pier. He shouldered his rifle and held out his arms expectantly. "Come on, now. Tessa first."

It was about six and a half feet from the deck to the pier. Seeing Tessa's look of hesitation, Sousuke encouraged her silently. Boldly, she jumped, and Kurz caught her, her escape attempt meeting with success.

"You're up, Kaname!" Kurz shouted.

Kaname didn't hesitate. She sprang off the deck directly onto the pier. Sousuke followed suit. After moving away from the ship toward an orderly pile of shipping containers, they looked back at the sinking freighter.

"Looks like the end of the evil," Kurz noted, in good spirits. "There wasn't, like, a cool enough explosion, though. When the big boss loses his fortress, it really needs to go up in flames. This really lacked that satisfying finish. Know what I mean?"

"Say what?"

"Well . . ."

Despite their successful getaway, Tessa appeared troubled. "I'm worried about Mister Kalinin. He's still in there."

"What? The old guy was still alive?"

"Yes, and please don't imply he isn't now." Tessa scowled at Kurz.

Oblivious to her response, Kurz put his hand to his jaw. "Wow. This could be bad news. If he's still in there—"

"Urzu Seven to Urzu Two," Sousuke called into his radio.

Mao, standing by, replied instantly, "Urzu Two here. How'd it go?"

"The lieutenant commander is still inside the sinking ship—probably in the cargo hold. Can you help him?"

"Crap! You should've said something sooner."

As that reply came through, the air behind them wavered, startling Kaname.

"Wh-what?"

Blue electricity flickered through the air where nothing had been previously. A thick membrane of light expanded, and a giant humanoid shape materialized like an expanding ink stain. Little bursts of light flickered in all directions, and—all of a sudden—a gray AS knelt before them.

It was Mao's M9 Gernsback, coming out of ECS invisible mode. She had been waiting in anticipation of the appearance of the Savage that had attacked the research center.

The M9 flashed Kaname a quick peace sign before rising. Then, it ran toward the sinking ship.

"Be careful, Melissa," Tessa warned into the radio. "There still might be members of the terrorist organization in there."

"It's okay. I'm not dumb enough to get beat by a Savage."

"That's not what I meant. They have a—"

In the distance, sirens sounded. Red lights illuminated nearby shipping containers. The police were on their way.

"Ew, here they come," clucked Kurz. No doubt, they would arrive during Mao's search for Kalinin. Seeing Mao's M9, the police might attack. True, their small arms wouldn't really make a dent in the AS, however . . .

Skree! The shrill sound of tearing metal came from the freighter.

Startled, the four people on the pier turned around. Mao's M9 stood upright on the deck of the freighter, which was ninety percent underwater. Something didn't look right. The mech's back bent, and its arms flailed.

"What's wrong, Mao?"

"What . . . what is this?" panicked Mao.

To the sound of metal being bent, Mao's M9 rose slowly into the air. Something had grasped it by the lower half and was lifting

it. . . . It was a giant arm, as big as the whole M9. Actually, it was bigger: thicker and more powerful. Each of its fingers was the size of a normal Arm Slave's arm!

Warping and swelling, the deck shrieked as whatever belonged to that arm tried to stand up inside the ship.

Metal fragments flew in every direction, and before long, *it* stood proudly against the night sky.



CHAPTER 5
Behemoth

June 27, 02:36 (Japan Standard Time)
Koto, Tokyo, Japan
Akami Wharf

Sousuke felt like a kid at a magic show: What he was seeing had to be some kind of illusion. Although the mech still was pretty far away, it appeared so incredibly large that Sousuke's brain took a moment to recognize its humanoid shape. However, no matter how much his instinct protested the recognition, it was indeed humanoid. It had audacious arms and legs. Sousuke barely could make out the head, because the mech's enormous chest blocked his view. Its red armor shimmered with ocean water.

Everyone gaped at the gigantic Arm Slave.

"Oh my god," muttered Kurz.

"That's preposterous," Sousuke decided. He'd been in the ship's cargo hold, where he had seen the slumbering mech, but he hadn't dreamt it could be an AS. To him, it had looked like some kind of large machine rather than an AS, and this was not a foolish assumption: Who on Earth would recognize a mech that was more than five times the normal height? A person with any knowledge of Arm Slaves never would think to imagine an AS that size.

There were good reasons most mechs were about twenty-six feet tall and weighed ten tons. One limitation was the durability of frame materials. Another was the actuator aptitude output. Other considerations included generator size, secrecy, ease of adjustment, production efficiency, assignable mission objectives, and the size of accessory firearms, to name a few. All of these factors combined to make the normal size of an AS about twenty-six feet, because that was the most effective.

Outwardly, the giant AS looked relatively simple—at least, its armor was nowhere near as complex as that of the M9. It reminded them of a giant mythical beast, scrapped together from whatever discarded sheet metal its makers could find. It looked more like a magical marionette than a technological achievement.

Tightening its grip on the M9, the giant AS ground away at the smaller mech's armor, which appeared ready to crumble at any moment.

"Can't . . . move!" Mao screamed.

Having regained her senses, Tessa shouted into the radio. "Melissa! Swipe at the thumb with your monofilament blade!"

"Thumb? What are you talking about?" Mao didn't realize a giant AS held her in its grip—she was too close to identify the entire body. Friday, her mech's AI, probably couldn't recognize the shape, either.

"There's an outrageously large AS that's—"

Mao screamed as the Behemoth's other hand grabbed the M9's upper half. It turned her mech sideways, twisting both its arms.

In a demonstration of great strength, the huge AS pulled until the M9's waist twisted and broke. The upper and lower halves ripped apart. Milky white shock absorbent spewed from the torn torso like blood. The lower half malfunctioned, convulsing eerily.

"Melissa!" screamed Tessa.

Even Kurz paled to see the mech's leg spasms. Shielding her eyes, Kaname gripped Sousuke's arm.

Then, the giant AS—actually, it was probably large enough to warrant a different label—hoisted the two halves of the M9 into the night sky, as if offering a sacrifice to the gods of the night.

"Ho!"

A heavy bass sound reverberated across the pier.

"Ho!"

It was a voice—the giant's voice. The pilot's laughter came through a woofer hidden somewhere in the mech. It was a grim reverberation, as though it came all the way from the center of the Earth.

Even though it was a warm summer night, everyone present got chills.

Behemoth tossed the remains of the M9. The pieces spun through the air, splashing helplessly into the sea.

"Mao . . ." Sousuke appeared ready to dive in, but Kurz grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"If you go in there right in front of him, he'll squeeze you to death."

"But—"

"It's okay to worry about us, too. Look."

Pivoting slightly, the giant looked at them. The head, previously obscured by the large chest, became visible in the dim light. It looked like a cylindrical helmet. Where a human's mouth would be, the mech had four cannons.

"Aw, look at that smile. He likes us!"

The huge mech's vacant stare fell on the group. At first, it looked as though it might attack at any time—but it slowly shifted its torso and attention to all the arriving police and self-defense forces.

A few officers got out of their patrol cars and troop transport vehicles to stare at the monstrosity. There were three self-defense force Arm Slaves on the ground—second-generation mechs called "96s." They stood dead still, awed by the massive mech.

"Mister Sagara, do you have a satellite communicator?" inquired Tessa.

"The wireless radio has that capability."

"Let me see it."

"Here. We should get out of here. Let's get to the truck." After handing Tessa the wireless radio, he bolted for the truck. Realizing that standing around wasn't going to accomplish anything, the other three followed.

"What are you going to do?" Kaname asked Tessa.

"Well, we can call for reinforcements—or use a cruise missile."

"Reinforcements? Where are you going to get—"

"S-shut off your mech's engine," interrupted the self-defense force through a megaphone. "If you don't get out of it at once, we'll . . . we'll have to shoot! Do you hear me? Shut off your mech's engine—"

Thud.

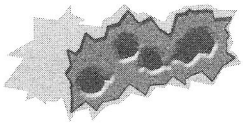
The huge AS stepped onto the pier. Mind-bogglingly enough, it made only faint cracks in the asphalt, although it seemed the ground should have crumbled to dust beneath its weight, given the mech's size.

"Um . . . Fire!"

Bullets and cannons fired all at once, like water bursting through a damn. The commotion was thunderously loud, similar to the roar of standing underneath a waterfall. Projectiles of various size and shape bombarded the giant.

Naturally, bullets were unable to penetrate the giant's armor. Not even the forty-millimeter AS rifles could break the surface.

"It's going to take more than that," Sousuke assessed while hurrying toward the truck.



Although the barrage of shots continued, Takuma felt as though he were merely taking a stroll through a light drizzle.

For the time being, he forgot about his injury. Rather, he felt as if he were floating. He had the power to rend a normal AS to

pieces. A flick of his wrist could crumple pylons and buildings. The oversized frame was an extension of Takuma, obeying his every command.

The futile volley of gunfire continued.

"What a pain," Takuma muttered. He gripped the master lever, pressing the round switch with his thumb.

"Lambda Driver, function B. Preparation: complete," announced Behemoth's AI.

Good, let's try it out.

Just then, one of the mechs on the pier prepared to fire an oversized rocket launcher. It was not the newest model, but it had enough drive to penetrate tank armor. Even Behemoth's armor would be susceptible to a weapon like that.

Takuma concentrated. His augmented consciousness—transformed through training and narcotics—formed a single image. He pictured something in the shape of a shield. More than envisioning its thickness, feel, and weight, he imagined each and every molecule. No, "molecule" was not the right word. The shield he wanted was not made of molecules; it consisted of a power found on the underside of matter—the intelligence to harness and control matter itself. That's what it was, something no one had invented a term to describe.

The self-defense force fired its large rocket, which flew directly toward Behemoth's chest.

Takuma thought about the shield, imagining something that didn't exist in the known world. Because he was different, his mind made it feasible for an instant: The Lambda Driver made his design real.

Before hitting the mech, the rocket exploded, its super-heated, high-pressure jets slamming into an invisible wall and scattering harmlessly.

"So useless," declared Takuma, smiling cruelly.

He pulled a trigger with his index finger, and fire spat from the four cannons in Behemoth's mouth, guns that the mech's engineer had called "Dragon Breath" when he designed them.

A vehement rain of destruction fell on Takuma's obstructers: Patrol cars and special vehicles blew apart and exploded in succession. Tires flew through the air, burning gasoline left trails, and smoke covered the pier. Men scrambled to escape, crawling and yelling for safety.

Ha ha! And all I had to do was take a breath!

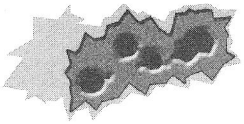
Although most of the police vehicles had blown up, the self-defense force's 96s still stood. Reproducing their operators' movements, the machines stepped backward in dismay. The one in the front stood its ground, prepared to fight, but the other mechs' legs almost trembled with their drivers' fear.

Takuma made his mech draw its longsword, which was named for its length—more than three times as long as a typical AS sword. Made of titanium alloy and ceramic, the weapon resembled a wooden sword designed for pummeling. Behemoth raised the sword, bringing it down in the direction of the three self-defense force Arm Slaves.

It didn't take much effort. Takuma merely walked forward and pinched: The initial crash of the blade smashed the lead mech to pieces. Takuma swept it to the side, meanwhile cutting a second mech in half. The third mech fell on its rear and held its hands in the air. Giving it a boot, Takuma sent it flying through the air like an empty soda can.

"Ha ha ha!" Takuma felt exhilarated. Nobody could stop him. Nobody could escape him.

No longer confused, Takuma was happy to be piloting the mech. He was now, unmistakably, king of the world.



When he saw an Arm Slave's severed arm fly through the air, Sousuke quickly determined that the self-defense force's mechs had fallen victim to Behemoth. Flames from the explosions illuminated the sky, and shouts and screams filled the air.

Oh. Why didn't they run? wondered Tessa.

Tessa couldn't help feeling at least partially responsible for this calamity. If only she'd killed Takuma when she'd had the opportunity, then nothing like this would have happened. True, they probably would have lost Kalinin—but more important, the enemy wouldn't have been able to activate Behemoth.

There were too many "ifs," too many diverging points.

Tessa wondered whether she could have done it. Could she have made a decision like that?

I couldn't, she knew.

In her whole life, Tessa had never been more acutely aware of her own imperfection. What happened with Kaname unpleasantly exposed her own inconsistency and hypocrisy. She recalled a day earlier, when she had been conceited enough to expect intelligence reports "as close to omnipotent as possible." And now, such incompetence!

Sousuke derailed her train of thought. "Reinforcements, Colonel?"

"Huh?"

"We have to stop that giant. Your instructions?"

Instructions. He still looked to her as his commander.

"I . . . I'm sorry."

Yes, they still had work to do. Brooding could wait until later. Tessa pressed the switch on the wireless radio and opened up a satellite channel.

"Go ahead."

"This is Testarossa. Extremely urgent, top priority: Please connect me to Commander Mardukas on the de Danaan."

"Roger. Five seconds, please."

Exactly five seconds later, the channel switched over to the executive officer, Commander Mardukas.

"Captain, glad to know you're safe."

"Mister Mardukas, how close is the ship right now?"

"About seventy-five miles south of the Kii Peninsula."

No good—the submarine was more than three hundred miles from Tokyo. It would take two hours to send Arm Slaves via helicopter, and they were out of range for AS urgent deployment boosters. They could pack the mechs into modified ballistic missiles, as they did during the Sunan Incident, but that would take at least an hour to prepare.

Tessa shuddered as she thought about how much damage Behemoth could cause in an hour or two. *There's nothing we can do. We have no means—*

"Captain, does the situation call for the Arbalest?" Mardukas asked flatly in his expressionless voice.

"It does."

"Immediately?"

"Yes."

"In that case, we'll launch it."

"What?"

"With your approval, of course. We could launch a ballistic missile carrying the Arbalest in less than three minutes. Once fired, it would reach you in six. That's nine minutes altogether."

Launching a ballistic missile would leave the de Danaan in a vulnerable position, because it would have to surface and open the flight deck. As the strongest, largest amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan attracted the attention of every navy in the world. If they weren't careful, the ship could be captured.

"Mister Mardukas . . ."

"I apologize, ma'am. I'm prepared to take punishment as you see fit."

Tessa imagined Commander Mardukas' skinny, nervous presence and smiled. *I'm always surrounded by such excellent people. It would be an insult to him if I told him 'no.'*

"You've done well. Launch it immediately."

"Yes, Captain. What's the airdrop location?"

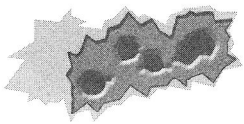
"Let me see . . ."

The wharf was out of the question, as the AS might not make it to the ground before Behemoth got to it. They needed a place with more complex terrain, where they could have a couple minutes for it to land and for the operator to get inside. A restricted field of view would be best, but the business district wouldn't work, because there were too many civilians there. She wanted low lighting, limited space, and altitudinal difference.

Where is the optimal location? Where can the Arbalest freely demonstrate its abilities? In less than a second, Tessa waded through a complex maze of thought, considering every possibility. There were uncertainties and dead ends. She could not reach a definitive conclusion on which place would be best. All she could do was struggle with options that were imperfect, at best.

Tessa tapped Kaname on the shoulder. "What's that building called?" She pointed over the water to a dimly lit tower that looked like an inverted pyramid.

"Oh, that's the International Exhibition Center. People call it 'Tokyo Big Sight.'"



Skillfully, Takuma tuned into Behemoth's sensors.

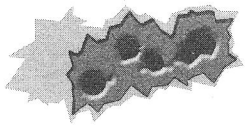
The cameras and infrared eyes mounted on various parts of the mech searched for targets. And because Takuma was a few hundred feet in the air, he could visually scan just about everything from his height, as well. Before long, Behemoth detected four heat sources in the shadow of a warehouse about a block away. There were two males and two females—running.

"There you are."

It's Tessa and her little friends. I'm surprised Sousuke is still alive; he won't be for long, not after he threatened to kill me. I'll never forget that humiliation. I'll feel better after I stomp on him, though. Oh, and that conceited bitch, Kaname! I'll get her, too. I don't care if I have to kill Tessa to get to the others. On second thought, I should kill them all. After all, Tessa made a fool of me and didn't bother to acknowledge my good will. If I can't have her, I'll break her.

"Yes, that's right . . ." Takuma cackled.

Pushing aside the thick, black smoke, the mech's feet moved forward with the sullenness of a tin doll. Slowly, Behemoth walked straight into the flames.



Sousuke and Kurz had left the secondhand truck behind a warehouse, a block away from the giant's birthplace.

Kaname laughed when she saw that it read "Takasawa Fish" on the side. "That's the best you can do?" Kaname asked, flaring her nostrils. "It kinda smells like fish."

"Don't complain. This is an emergency."

"Hellooo. Giant mech of destruction headed our way," reminded Kurz.

The robo-beast's footsteps grew louder with each plodding step. The nearby containers and streetlights shook. Although the containers obstructed their view of Behemoth, there were plenty of other indications of its approach. Had it detected them?

"Regardless of aesthetic, it's convenient," mumbled Tessa.

"What? Convenient? What the hell are you—"

"Get in! We need to move!" shouted Sousuke. He dove into the driver's seat.

Kaname climbed into the passenger seat as Kurz and Tessa leapt into the bed of the truck.

The giant's head peered down at them over a pile of containers in the near distance. Its face consisted of two round eyes and a simple,

bucket-armor style mouth. And when the head lolled to stare at them, it looked like an antiquated toy.

"Pedal to the metal!" commanded Kaname, repeatedly striking Sousuke on the shoulder.

"I know, I know. We're going."

As soon as the engine turned over, Sousuke peeled out. He rounded a corner of the warehouse so fast that the truck tilted in response.

Tessa leaned forward from the bed and said: "Listen up, Mister Sagara. We need to draw out that giant AS."

Sousuke couldn't believe his ears. *Draw out the giant? Where? How? And why not just commit suicide, instead?*

"Colonel—"

"We must," she interrupted calmly. "That's why Mithril pays us the big bucks. Don't worry about my safety, either. Trust your skills."

That was all Sousuke needed to hear to sink into a mysterious mood, consisting of the self-confidence present only in those who feel trusted intermingled with a sense of defiance. If Tessa could place that much faith in him, then he would do what needed to be done, plain and simple.

"Very well. Where shall I lead it, then?"

"Straight ahead. Turn right at the intersection and head for the International Exhibition Center. If we use the overhead monorail structure as a shield, we should be able to make it."

Well, that's a good escape route, decided Sousuke, satisfied.

"The Arbalest will airdrop on the west side of the building, and the rest of us will buy you time so you can board it."

"I'll be piloting it?" he asked, glancing at Kurz in the mirror.

"Correct. At this point in time, that mech is set up only for you. After the incident two months ago—"

"It's following us!" shouted Kaname.

Sure enough, the giant ambled toward them, kicking over streetlights and roadside trees. It wasn't running, yet it still was moving quickly enough that it could catch up to them if they weren't careful, especially considering the enormity of its strides.

Its head turned directly toward them. . . . It was going to fire the mouth cannons!

"It's about to shoot. When I signal, swerve!" yelled Kurz.

"Got it."

"Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it . . . now!"

Sousuke cranked the wheel as hard as he could. At the same time, the massive mech spat death from above. It spewed several



dozen thirty-millimeter rounds per second. Each round was about the size of a milk bottle, traveling at supersonic speeds.

Little explosions came down to the right of the truck, and everyone screamed.

Reduced to chunks, asphalt flew. The guardrail became warped and tattered like an old rag before finally flying into the air.

As streetlights crashed to the ground, the truck tilted. With great skill, Sousuke wrangled it back onto all four wheels.

Kurz held Tessa, who nearly flew from the truck.

Not good. This was no way to draw out the mech. If it were to fire again and aim a little better, they might not be so lucky again.

"Sousuke, just drive straight!" instructed Kurz.

"What are you going to do?"

"Hit it where it hurts! Keep straight and hold a constant speed."

"Got it."

Following orders, Sousuke drove forward at a fixed rate. Kurz knelt, pointing his rifle at the giant AS.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Hold on, Kaname." Kurz smiled. "You'll see, soon enough."

Narrowing his eyes like a hawk, Kurz licked his upper lip and carefully aimed the rifle, as if caressing a lover. The barrel shook

up and down from the vehicle's movement. Kurz looked like he was taking that into account, as well as the flow of the wind and the movement of the light. He judged everything, assessing the situation and preparing lock, stock, and barrel.

"That's right . . . aim at me, you piece of shit."

As the giant prepared to fire another blast from its cannons, Sousuke battled the impulse to yank the wheel. He trusted his partner, though, and he held the course.

Here it comes, Kurz could feel the moment, and he fired a shot.

He shot only once, expelling a rifle round that couldn't penetrate the outer plating of a small armored vehicle. Regardless, something went awry with the giant's head. Sparks preceded a small explosion, and one of the cannons blew into fragments. Black smoke gushed from the right side of Behemoth's head.

The huge frame staggered. Behemoth lifted its right hand to its metal head and let out a howl.

"Right on." Kurz's shot had flown into the barrel of the cannon and detonated the chambered round. The hole probably was no more than three centimeters; to hit it from a moving vehicle from a distance of more than three hundred feet was nothing short of incredible.

"Kurz, that was amazing," gushed Kaname.

"Yes, leave it to me."

"I always figured you were all talk!"

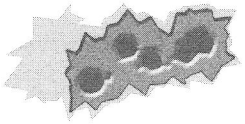
For once, Kurz was silent.

"It's too soon to feel safe," Sousuke announced. Although half the enemy's cannons were gone, they couldn't hope for another miracle shot.

To make matters worse, the monstrosity shook off its confusion and let out a roar. It gained on them, taking quick steps now. It was a steel tsunami, smashing up the road and nearly blotting out the sky.

"Shit!"

Sousuke floored it.



June 27, 02:41 (Japan Standard Time)
Koto, Tokyo, Japan
Akami Wharf

Andrei Kalinin felt himself being dragged through rippling water up onto the harbor ramp on the very edge of the wharf.

There was a bullet lodged in his shoulder, and he had lost a lot of blood and body heat in the sea water. He was completely exhausted; so much so that simply moving proved difficult.

Who had hauled him through the water and swum to this ramp? He propped himself up to check.

With her legs still in the water, her pale face turned toward the night sky, Seina was lying on the ramp beside him.

She saved me. Kalinin was not terribly surprised. True, she had shot him, but not fatally. At the time, she had been close enough to him that it was difficult to imagine she'd miss a head shot unless it were deliberate.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Seina wondered.

"No." After answering, Kalinin noticed a large amount of blood pooling underneath her back. He couldn't see the wound because her back was to the ground, but he could tell it was serious. She already had deteriorated beyond any first aid he could offer.

"Did Behemoth begin operation?"

"Yes, you win."

"Not that it matters now," she said in a somewhat effeminate voice. "We created it as an anti-AS gun port, mostly arming it with weapons to hunt Arm Slaves."

"Ah, and its size makes it too lethargic."

"That's what Takuma and the Lambda Driver were for."

Even a mech of that size couldn't withstand a direct hit from a tank's cannon or an ultra-high speed missile. In contests between shields and weapons, weapons usually won. To solve that problem, the huge machine needed a Lambda Driver.

"It—it's impossible to destroy it. It has forty hours of fuel. Until that runs out, no one can stop it."

"That depends on Takuma."

"I feel sorry for him," Seina wheezed. "His memory's all messed up. At some point, he mistook me for the sister he actually had murdered. In that way, I used him."

Kalinin didn't know what to say.

"I don't have any relatives," she gasped. "Forever . . . alone."

For a moment, the two listened to the explosions in the distance, which reminded them of distant thunder warning of an imminent downpour.

"You didn't ask." Seina commented.

"Ask what?"

"Why I saved you."

"I can guess," he said.

Perhaps Kalinin reminded her of someone else. Maybe she couldn't bring herself to completely abandon social connections. Or maybe she wanted someone who had known her to survive to carry on her memory. In any case, it was a sad story.

"You act like you know everything," she moaned. "I hate that. It makes me sick."

"Sorry," he apologized sincerely.

"I hate you so much." Seina smiled—that rare smile Kalinin had seen only once before. "Could you at least tell me your name?"

"Andre Sergeivich Kalinin."

"Weird name . . ." Seina declared softly before drifting off into eternal silence.

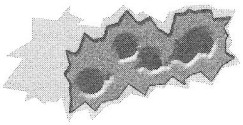
As anyone in a similar situation would, Kalinin gently closed her open eyes, causing her hollow, dead face to become a beautiful visage of sleep. Seeing her like that, no one would imagine what a destructive terrorist she had been in life.

A priest, like you said, he thought. *I've watched far too many people die.*

Behind him, someone was making a great deal of noise swimming through the water and then clambering up onto the ramp. Sputtering and dripping wet, Melissa Mao appeared beside him. She must have seen Kalinin from afar, because she was not remotely surprised by his survival.

"Hell, I thought I was a goner, for sure," said Mao, announcing her presence. She took note of the corpse beside Kalinin. "Friend of yours?"

"Something like that."



June 27, 02:44 (Japan Standard Time)
Koto, Tokyo, Japan
Ariake

Kaname marveled at herself, surprised at her own calmness. Earlier, she had been scared enough that her temples pounded and she could hear the blood coursing through her veins. Now, however, she couldn't hear her pulse any longer.

Ah, that's better. So, this is the way Sousuke lives, she thought, regarding her own state of mind.

This wasn't the first time she had found herself in this kind of situation. Including everyday trivialities, everyone faced situations like this: encountering enemies of some nature or another and fearing them, yet standing up to the challenge. If she had quivered in fear, she never would be able to do what needed to be done.

The human mind certainly was a brilliant piece of work.

Crack!

The giant's cannons destroyed the overhead railway of the monorail (which, in actuality, was not a true monorail), and clumps of concrete crumbled down.

It's coming right at us. We can't avoid it. It's going to hit . . . no.

The truck barely evaded several dozen tons of falling concrete. The remains of the structure broke to pieces against the pavement, and Behemoth easily kicked the largest pieces from its path. It was like a murderous whirlwind leaving a trail of destruction.

"Ha ha ha! Go, go!" Kurz laughed deliriously, high on adrenaline.

"Maybe you could shoot it again, instead of laughing," Sousuke suggested from the driver's seat.

"Let's not get crazy. Keep—hey, whoa! Keep moving, buddy!"

Kurz's sniper shot and the loss of half its cannons must have compromised the accuracy of Behemoth's remaining guns. There had been several recent bursts of fire that couldn't find the target. However, the surroundings had not been spared because of the lack of accuracy. The misaligned shots destroyed passing cars and taxis. The cars skidded, rolled, and slammed into the guardrails. Trees and

streetlights toppled like bowling pins. Broken glass and chunks of asphalt littered the streets.

A strange vibration in the truck's suspension indicated that it was not completely undamaged, either. Periodically, the engine emitted a high-pitched whine. The body was pretty torn up, and the windows all were broken.

Finally, they neared the International Exhibition Center. *What the hell are we going to do when we get there?* Kaname wondered.

"There it is," mumbled Sousuke.

Following his gaze, Kaname saw a cylindrical capsule drifting through the air at their two o'clock. Dangling from three parachutes, it descended quickly through the night sky, toward the cluster of giant silver buildings ahead of them.

"I've seen that before . . ." Kaname noted. She had seen the same kind of capsule falling from the sky during the previous incident in Sunan. It would burst open in the air, releasing the AS it contained.

"Uh oh. It's fully visible."

Oh ho ho! Takuma did not overlook the capsule. With a muffled laugh, Takuma fired the cannons at the mech paratrooper. A blitz of white lights flew at the capsule.

Direct hit.

The parachutes shredded and the wires snapped. Full of holes, the capsule plummeted in a hail of metal shards. It didn't explode, but it didn't look good.

"It got taken out!"

"No, not yet," Tessa said confidently. "That mech will not break so easily. Mister Sagara?"

"Yes, ma'am. Chidori, I need a favor."

"What is it?"

"Drive, please."

Without further ado, Sousuke released the wheel and half-opened the driver-side door.

"Holy . . . I don't know how to drive!" she objected. "I'm in high school!"

Hastily, she grabbed the wheel. The truck approached a wide overpass. Once they were under it, they would be shielded from the giant, at least temporarily.

"Can't Kurz do it?"

"No time. You can do it," Sousuke assured her before leaping from the truck. The image of his body smacking the road and rolling quickly faded in the mirror.

As Behemoth climbed on the overpass in pursuit of the truck, its driver didn't notice Sousuke standing up.

"Um, what is that?"

"Turn, Kaname!"

Having slid into the driver's seat, Kaname reflexively yanked the wheel to the right at Kurz's request. The truck ignored a red light and shot through an intersection, tires squealing. Thankfully, there were no other cars on that road at that time of night.

Making me drive . . .

Kaname contemplated stamping on the brakes, but Tessa prodded her from behind.

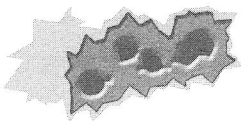
"If you stop, we're toast!"

Kaname grunted. Tessa was right. The absurdly large AS still was pursuing them. If they stopped, it would trample them, and that would be the end of the story.

This is nuts. Maybe I should jump out and run, too. No, that's impossible.

"Fine, dammit!"

Kaname floored it.



What a complicated group of buildings, thought Sousuke.

The International Exhibition Center consisted of many overlapping floors, with a large, open space at the center. To get from one story to another, Sousuke took several strange detours, which often led to dead ends. At that point, he relied on his guns and grenades to bash through shuttered doors, forcing his way through to the capsule's drop point.

Passing the West Exhibition Hall, Sousuke ground to a halt in front of a non-functioning escalator. He saw the capsule below him: It was a huge hall—probably big enough to house an entire small building.

In the center of the room, the scorched, bullet-riddled capsule lay on its side in a nest of crushed steel and broken glass. It was the size of a tanker truck, and it had made a hole of similar size in the room's glass ceiling, where it had crashed through.

Sousuke took the escalator steps three at a time, running up to the capsule. Hopefully, there still would be an AS in there.

White smoke rose from the bullet holes. Theoretically, there should have been a manual lever that he could use to activate the explosive bolts and crack open the capsule.

It's not there. After frantically searching the capsule for ten whole seconds, Sousuke could not find the panel that housed the lever.

Could it be facing the floor? If it had fallen with the lever facing downward, he'd be unable to rupture the capsule and pilot the AS inside.

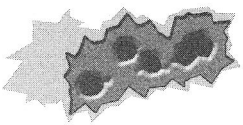
Despite the fact that the capsule had endured five or six thirty-millimeter shots, it was still in great shape. Prying it open by hand wasn't possible. His guns wouldn't help, either. He had only one grenade left, no explosives.

Maybe he could at least move the capsule with that one grenade. Sousuke was not confident in this idea, but he didn't have a lot of time to waste. Every second he spent in there was one more second the giant could chase and possibly destroy Kaname and his comrades.

All I can do is try, he decided.

He pulled the pin and shoved the grenade between the capsule and the floor. He released and stood clear. Several seconds later, the grenade exploded.

The large capsule swayed. Sousuke held his breath. The metal tube inclined a little bit . . . and then, it fell back into its original position.



Kaname comforted herself with the thought that automobiles were essentially oversized go-karts. Fortunately, the truck had an automatic transmission. "Yeah, there we go."

The road in front of them was straight and wide open. If they tried to drive on it, they would become sitting ducks. They had to get into a more enclosed space.

"I'm turning!" Kaname announced before cranking the wheel.

To prevent the entry of unauthorized vehicles, the exhibition center parking lot closed its sturdy gate at night. Ramming the gate probably would total the truck, so Kaname jerked the wheel again, sending the truck through a group of shrubs. She crashed through the flimsier fence, instead.

Miraculously, the truck did not roll. The frame jumped in every direction, however, and the steering wheel tried to impose its own will.

Kaname felt a dull pain in her right hand—her thumb bled on the wheel. There was no time to complain. Behemoth's feet stepped closer and closer to the truck, which lost considerable speed when it bashed through the fence. They couldn't see the sky anymore.

"Speed up!"

"I'm trying!"

The giant's toe grazed the back of the truck, tearing off the license plate. Courageously, the truck accelerated, approaching the outer wall of the center.

Kaname barely avoided a head-on collision with the wall. The truck's left side rubbed against the wall before Kaname managed to gain control. She rocketed around the building's unreasonably large circumference.

"We'll be shot out here!"

"Inside, get inside! Break through that shuttered door!" shouted Kurz.

Behemoth's guns fired, pulverizing a nearby section of the wall. Sharp fragments flew through the air and pierced the empty passenger seat, which Kaname once had occupied; Kaname found that quite amusing, actually.

She felt her perception widening. Her sense of existence swelled until she could see each and every piece of glass and asphalt flying through the air. For some reason, she felt as if she could see Kurz pinning Tessa down in the truck bed, despite that they were behind her.

She no longer felt the pain in her thumb as she skillfully turned the wheel and pulled the handbrake just long enough to send the truck skidding sideways. It all felt natural.

Again, she jammed her foot on the gas, keeping the truck moving. The giant closed in, but they were still okay. The truck charged at a shutter door.

I can do it. I can do it. I'm capable of this.

The shutter neared—rapidly.

There was a loud crash as the truck collided with door. Kaname couldn't see anything in front of her anymore. The door was sturdier than they had thought. Because she hadn't had time to put on her seatbelt, Kaname had bashed her head on the steering wheel. The impact was so harsh that she easily could have suffered a depressed skull fracture. But the truck had broken through the door, and they rolled into the exhibition center. The muffler fell off somewhere, and the sound of the exhaust became terrible.

Although everything seemed fuzzy, Kaname stepped on the gas. The exhausted truck, however, had other ideas. It was out of stamina, its gears completely out of whack, and it wouldn't go any farther.

The inside of the International Exhibition Center was huge—big enough for a freighter to fit inside. Currently, there weren't any exhibits, merely expansive darkness. There was nothing at all.

The rolling truck ate up the last of its inertia and stopped.

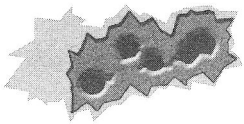
"Tessa. Hey, Tessa!" shouted Kurz.

Tessa was lying limp in the truck's bed. Kaname couldn't tell if she was unconscious or dead, but blood was trickling down the colonel's forehead.

Part of my head's totally spacing out, like everything around me is moving away. What is this? I've felt it before.

Behind them, the wall and ceiling began to creak. Concrete tumbled as the steel frame tore off. Moonlight spilled in.

A bucket-shaped head with two hollow eyes peered through the crack in the wall. It twisted its head as if to say, "Done now?"



"Game, set, match," muttered Takuma through shallow breaths.

He could feel that his lower half was soaked with blood from his wound. His eyes couldn't focus—the characters on his screen looked blurry.

It's almost over now. I . . . I'll feel better once I crush you all. Then, my wound will heal, I know it.

"Lambda Driver, A-function declining," warned the AI. "Interference waves occurring in frame."

The mech emitted a dissonant creak. *Uh oh, I have to concentrate.* Takuma shook his head, focusing every ounce of his awareness into his body—otherwise, the mech wouldn't be able to move.

"A-function: recovering."

Good. With a swipe of the mech's arms and legs, Takuma destroyed more of the wall. He took a step inside.

The fleeing party's truck appeared to be completely broken down, showing no signs of ever being able to move again.

There was Tessa, in the bed of the truck, apparently unconscious. Another white man held her. That was the guy who'd had the gall to fire a rifle at him. He had to be punished, too.

Kaname Chidori opened the driver-side door and staggered out. Putting her hand to her head, she leaned against the bed.

She must be injured. Serves her right.

Suddenly, Takuma realized Sousuke Sagara was not with them.

Where is he? He was driving that thing. That's no good if he's gone. I have to stomp on him, or I won't feel . . .

"Where's Sagara?" Takuma boomed through Behemoth's external speakers.

No one said anything, although he definitely had been loud enough for them to hear.

"Tell me! Where did he go?"

Tottering forward, Kaname Chidori looked up at Takuma, like an ant peering up at a devious child. She wanted to say something. He aimed one of the mech's sensors, a highly sensitive directional microphone.

"I don't know, moron! Why don't you ask your sister?"

Takuma glowered. *Fine. Just die, then. I was stupid to ask.* He aimed his cannons.

Kaname and Kurz attempted to shield themselves and Tessa. *It's just as well that she's out cold. After I rip them all to shreds, I'm going to step on them until there's not a single piece left.*

"This'll teach you!"

Takuma pressed the trigger.

The sound of a heavy impact reverberated through the walls. The giant's head tilted to the right with a large jerk—not from the cannon fire's recoil, from something else.

"What the hell?"

Something had shot at the head from the side. It was bigger than a machine gun—definitely an AS.

"Looking for me?" asked a voice.

Takuma turned his head.

In the light of the moon on the north side of the exhibition center, a single AS knelt on the roof. It held a short-barreled shot cannon in both hands, which it pointed directly at Behemoth.

What the . . .

The milky white mech cut a slender, bold silhouette. It looked more like a demigod than a weapon. On the head, where a person's mouth would be, it had a large hard point for equipment retention, which made it appear like a ninja holding a scroll in his mouth.

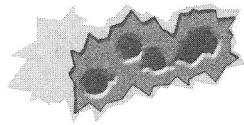
"Licking your lips in front of your prey," clucked Sousuke over the speaker. "How third rate."

"What?"

"I'll be your opponent. Come on." The white AS beckoned with its left index finger, taunting Takuma.

Gutsy. You think you can beat me with that tiny mech? A spark of hate ignited in Takuma's chest. "Fine by me."

Behemoth turned and charged toward the white AS.



Sousuke made it just in time.

Inside the ARX-7 Arbalest's cockpit, Sousuke secretly let out a sigh of relief.

Although his grenade had failed to move the capsule with the mech inside, the jostle had convinced the explosive bolts to detonate, and the external plating had flown off.

Naturally, Sousuke had been pleasantly surprised.

Inside, the Arbalest was fine. Although it had taken several bullets, none had penetrated its cutting-edge armor. Due to the fall, however, the propulsion system was not functioning at one hundred percent.

As it lumbered toward Sousuke, the giant AS, Behemoth, obliterated the exhibition center. For its size, the mech was remarkably agile.

"Proximity alert," warned AI, the Arbalest's AI.

Sousuke already knew, though, because the image of the approaching mech filled his entire screen. It looked not unlike a raging tsunami with arms and legs.

Holding his shot cannon in both hands to suppress recoil, Sousuke pulled the trigger. It sent a high voltage burst from the Arbalest's palm, firing the cannon in fully automatic mode. *D-d-d-d-doom!* It fired all the shots in its barrel.

Each shot was a depleted-uranium APFSDS round that could destroy an armored vehicle in a single blast. Sousuke fired six rounds in all. *That should be sufficient,* he thought realistically.

The air in front of Behemoth distorted. All the shots ran up against an invisible wall, which obstructed and repelled them. The rounds scattered.

A giant arm swung down, too close for comfort. The Arbalest barely managed to leap out of the way. Roofing material swirled around in a complex dance with dust fragments in the air.

Was that . . . Sousuke knew what it was. Two months earlier, he had fought an AS with a similar ability—the ability to emit a bizarre force field using a Lambda Driver. Sousuke had no clue how it worked, but he knew it could repel all his physical attacks.

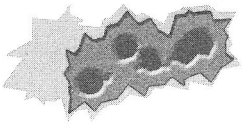
While the Arbalest rolled on the roof, Sousuke drew its anti-tank dagger. It was a powerful throwing knife lined with plastic explosives. He flung the knife with an underhanded wrist flick, the way a person snaps a whip. It flew straight at Behemoth's neck.

Boom! Again. The attack stopped short, detonating in midair.

"Ho ho," laughed Behemoth. It fired its cannons, releasing a swarm of shells. Sousuke evaded the barrage—if he could do so in

a truck, then it would be much easier in the Arbalest. He put a new magazine in the empty shot cannon.

So, the thing is that huge, and I can't shoot it. How the hell am I supposed to beat it?



There it is again, thought Kaname. *A dark, heavy feeling, like I'm floating. How many times has this happened?*

Over the past couple of months, this sensation had visited her periodically: in the morning before she woke up, in class, while relaxing, in the bath, and at other times, too.

Kaname never told anyone about it, not even Kyouko and Sousuke. If anyone asked, she simply said that she didn't feel well. So far, that had sufficed as an explanation—but it hadn't prevent the feeling from happening.

It's come. Maybe I think he needs it. When did I think that, though? Oh, there it is again. Th-there. A-again. There it is. Again, again.

The feeling disrupted her ability to use words coherently. Kaname felt that, if she let it, it would take hold of her completely.

Culled, called, cawed. You called you? whispered the voice, which sounded identical to Kaname's. *The same voice as you, voice as you, you, you.*

Shut up.

Up. Sh-shut. Hee hee. You, in the way. Die, come on, die.

Be quiet.

Y-y-you sure? S-sure? I a-am necessary, aren't I?

Yes. You're necessary. Didn't you tell me that?

S-so-so. Sousuke dies. At this r-rate. D-dies, m-miserable. Pitiful!

Why don't you just come out and say it?

Fine, let me s-say it. Sur-surend-render. You die. Hey, hey.

Suppressing the voice for a moment, Kaname cradled her head and tugged at the chest of her shirt.

Don't get carried away. Just tell me. What does that giant have? How can we stop it? What does Sousuke have to do?

You don't f-feel well?

No. Terrible. Answer me. I won't lose. Won't lose. Augh!

You can't do it. C-can't. Kaname, you can't do it, idiot!

Don't mess with me!

In an animalistic rage, Kaname snarled at *it*. *It* grew frightened, curled up in a ball, and sobbed.

Y-you d-don't have to get angry. I . . . I'm n-not. I won't do anything. I'm not bad.

Ha! You're scared, taunted Kaname, growling.

Stop that, Kaname! This sounded like her voice, too, but it was different. It was someone else. Who?

Ah, damn. That bitch is h-here. T-to get in th-the way.

You try instigating her now. *I'll show no mercy.*

Pbblt! Here I am. I'm r-right h-here. H-here.

We don't need you! I'm here, now.

N-nooo. That's. That is. Mistake.

Be gone!

It left. *One* left. The second voice to arrive remained and spoke: *Kaname. Kaname?*

What? Who are you?

That doesn't matter. I must ask you a favor.

A favor?

Please, tell him.

Tell who? What?

Using the Lambda Driver. A cooling apparatus, on the giant's back . . .

What?

One of the mechs. Lambda Driver. Coolant . . .

A fragmented image started to materialize in Kaname's mind, vanishing as quickly as it appeared.

Kaname gaped as her surroundings suddenly came back into view.

Originating from the destroyed roof, a beam of light cut through the darkness in the exhibition center. Kaname spotted their dead truck.

Somewhere, there was gunfire—most likely from Sousuke's far-off fight.

With an aberrantly serious look on his face, Kurz Weber gripped Kaname by the shoulders and stared at her with his shockingly blue eyes.

"Wh-what?"

"Huh?" grunted Kurz, surprised. With a sigh, his seriousness melted away to his usual levity, and the tension in his fingers loosened. "Good, you're back."

"Who is? What? Um, did I . . ."

"Yeah. I couldn't snap you out of it, no matter what I did. You were mumbling a bunch of craziness until you shouted 'Stop it, Kaname!' Scared the crap out of me."

For a moment, Kaname wondered what Kurz meant by "no matter what I did," but she tried to not think about it too much. She did notice a stinging in both cheeks, however, and attributed this to Kurz's panic.

Tessa was still lying in the truck bed—alive, at least for the moment.

Kaname thought about what she had seen—or heard, rather. Was that Tessa's voice or was it something else?

Kaname would tell Sousuke to use the Lambda Driver to do something to a cooling apparatus on the giant's back—its Lambda thingamajig.

What did it all mean? Kaname sensed it was important. Very important.

It had to do with the giant's back. Maybe Kaname would understand if she took a look. *Wait . . . what am I thinking?* That was way too dangerous. If Behemoth sensed her, Takuma would stomp on her like an ant. With no vehicle, she had no way to escape if it came after her. One crunch and she'd be a pancake.

There's also the danger of stray bullets, she reasoned. *And what would I do if the building collapsed? I'd die—really die.*

Why do I have to get involved in this kind of danger when it doesn't concern me? I've already been through some pretty terrible stuff. Isn't that enough? It'd be foolish to do this kind of thing. I should hide somewhere, instead. That's right. Enough of this!

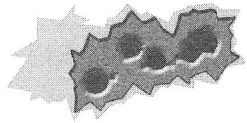
As much as Kaname tried to talk herself out of it, her mind already was made up.

He's in danger. He needs me. Regardless of whatever there is between that girl and him, I'd still feel terrible if he died. I don't want that. I'd never want that. In other words, I have no choice but to go.

What the hell. Jeez!

Fear was a nasty parasite—if you let it bite you once, it always would come back for more. Kaname shook her head, told fear to get lost, and then held out her hand.

"Kurz, give me your transmitter!"



Behemoth drew its longsword and took an aggressive swipe at the Arbalest. The cudgel the size of a steel tower moved with malicious speed.

"Hup!" Sousuke leapt, and the sword barely passed under his mech's toes.

Rolling once in the air, Sousuke twisted and fired a deft shot at the enemy's head. The Arbalest's motion and weapon-control systems were designed to accommodate such acrobatic attacks.

Behemoth deflected the shot.

Unbelievable! Sousuke thought as he barely dodged another sword slash. *Can he use that barrier—that Lambda Driver—infinitely? If so, is there a way to get through it?*

"Al!" called Sousuke.

"Yes, Sergeant?" responded the artificial intelligence.

"This mech has a Lambda Driver, right?"

"Affirmative."

Indeed, the Arbalest theoretically had the same kind of equipment as Behemoth. Its capabilities, however, were as unclear as the means of using them. Sousuke never received any kind of explanation or training.

"Assuming the enemy mech has a Lambda Driver installed, is there a way to beat it?"

Al computed for a moment. "Unknown."

Stymied again by silly confidentiality rules!

"As the NCO in this battle, I demand to know!" bellowed Sousuke.

"Demand acknowledged. Answer unknown."

Apparently, even Al, the AI, didn't know exactly what the Lambda Driver was.

Sousuke tried to recall how he had used it two months earlier. He had escaped from enemy territory after a struggle to the death with Gauron's AS. Kaname had advised him to picture injecting his willpower into the bullet, and that's when the mech's Lambda Driver had kicked in. That was how he broke through the enemy's force field.

Okay, I'll give it a shot.

Exhaling deeply, Sousuke stood the mech upright, aimed its gun, and concentrated.

Don't be stressed. And don't feel stupid. Here we go. The shot I'm about to fire will break through his shield. Believe it. Yes, just like last time.

Behemoth pushed its way through sections of the roof and advanced.

Sousuke aimed for its neck, picturing the result. *Here we go.*

He squeezed the trigger, and the shot cannon spat fire. One shot. The air around the Arbalest wavered for an instant, and an alarm sounded in the cockpit. A red triangle symbol flickered in the corner of his display screen.

Was that it?

The armor-piercing round stopped just short of Behemoth. Unlike its predecessors, however, it did not scatter. It retained its shape.

It was a bizarre sight—the arrow-shaped bullet advanced, slowly and forcefully.

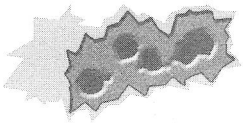
Womm! It made a strange sound, and it looked as if two invisible hands were engaged in a tug-of-war over the bullet.

Pop! The shot broke through and struck Behemoth in the neck.

"Did that get through?" Sousuke wondered while he nimbly retreated. He noticed smoke coming from the giant's neck, but that was the extent of the damage. The enemy mech was simply too large. It would be like trying to sink an aircraft carrier or battleship with a single shot.

"So, it's no use?"

Behemoth faltered for a moment before resuming its chase after the Arbalest.



"Whoa!"

As Kaname reached the east side of the International Exhibition Center, a six-foot piece of steel nearly squashed her. It flew right by her nose and bounced on the floor.

The fierce battle between Behemoth and the Arbalest was unfolding in the eastern part of the exhibition center, facing the parking lot. Actually, it wasn't a fierce fight as much as it was a demonstration of Sousuke's incredible evasive skills. He avoided attacks and ran for all he was worth.

Weak. Entirely too weak.

Or perhaps the enemy was simply too big. At that size, those movements were practically against the rules. Perhaps the most outrageous thing was that Sousuke kept managing to avoid the attacks.

"Ah!"

The battlefield was close enough to terrify Kaname. Gusts of wind fluttered her hair every time the mechs shifted positions. Each time the giant moved, rubble scattered, a tempest raged, and the earth shook. And there was a large cloud of dust hanging overhead, which prevented Kaname from getting a good look at Behemoth's back.

"We'd better get back; it's too dangerous!" shouted Kurz.

"No!" she declined, although she wanted to run. "I have to get closer and look."

"Hey, come on now—"

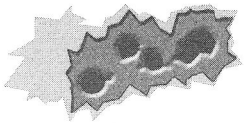
"You don't have to come with me. Run!"

"How could I bail like that on such a cool chick?" asked Kurz, who looked to be close to tears.

"Fine, do what you want. I'm going, regardless!"

"Aw, this is messed up!"

Choking in the dust cloud, they dashed along the outer wall. In their wake, a slab of concrete fell and smashed to bits where they had been standing seconds earlier.



The longsword roared and hacked at the air. Arbalest dodged the sword, but not the subsequent cannon fire, which hit its legs and chest. Thankfully, the angle was shallow in both cases, and the shots didn't penetrate the armor. However, the Arbalest lost its balance.

Behemoth reached out its left hand.

I can't dodge, thought Sousuke.

At the same time, Behemoth grabbed the Arbalest's left arm. Its tremendous strength pressed on the armor, accompanied by the sickening crunch of parts getting crushed.

What power!

"Ha! Ho!" Behemoth raised Arbalest above its head, and the movement created enough Gs to make Sousuke dizzy.

It was going to throw him to the ground! Even a mech as sophisticated as the Arbalest couldn't withstand an impact like that. The joints would shatter to pieces!

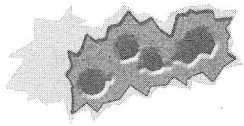
Sousuke turned his cannon on the giant's thumb and fired. Even though he was at close range, the giant generated a force field between

the gun barrel and its thumb, causing the shell to bounce away. It was no use. At this rate . . .

Seeing no other option, Sousuke turned the gun toward the Arbalest's upper arm and pulled the trigger.

With a large jolt, the mech's arm blew off at the shoulder. Freed, the Arbalest crashed into Behemoth's shoulder and tumbled toward the ground. The motion control system frantically worked to regain its bearings; somehow, the Arbalest managed to land feet first. Evaporated shock absorbent hissed from every joint in the mech's lower half.

Al began to report the long list of damages.



Hiding behind an orange trash can, Kaname desperately tried to sneak a peek at the giant's back.

Watch out, Sousuke! If I shout that, he won't be able to do a thing. Before I get excited, I need to figure out what to say. Where is it? Where?

The monster's back was far overhead. Small pieces of metal rained down. It was hard for Kaname to keep her eyes open very long.

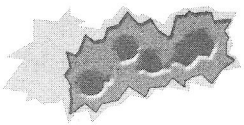
Behemoth's back armor was slanted and consisted of a number of blocks. *Where is the cooling apparatus? Cooling apparatus . . . There's probably something in those holes.*

"Kurz, do you know where the cooling apparatus is?"

"Yeah, there are a lot of them. They're those oblong-ish, uh, you know, round things."

There were several small holes on the giant's back in double rows on either side of the spine: Two oblong slits and four round holes.

Which? Which one is the Lambda Driver's cooling apparatus? What does that mean? The point is, the Lambda Driver needs to be cooled, which is why the holes are there. So that's its weak point? Should Sousuke attack there? And which one of the holes is the right one, even?



There's no way to beat it. There's no blind spot and, no matter what, my attacks can't damage it. Sousuke assessed. *My mech's propulsion system is practically at the breaking point. At this rate, I'm going to die.*

"Sousuke, can you hear me?" chirped a voice through a short-range transmission.

Sousuke resumed his evasive maneuvers. "Chidori?"

"Yeah, listen up! I don't totally understand, but the cooling apparatus for that thing's Lambda Driver are on its back."

"So?"

"So, attack that spot. I think."

"You *think?*"

"That's all I know. It can't be a normal attack. You have to use the Lambda Driver—your AS has one, right?"

"Did the colonel tell you that?"

"Tessa? I'm not sure. Maybe. Probably. Let's just say she did."

"Could you be any more vague?" Sousuke asked, right as he noticed Kaname and Kurz squatting in front of a wall, close enough for him to touch with the arm he had left. *Why did they come into the danger zone?* He couldn't afford to let them distract him.

The giant kicked at him from his left. He couldn't dodge it completely. Wham! The Arbalest arced through the air, heading toward Kaname and Kurz. It smacked the wall, back first.

"Eek!"

If she's screaming, then at least she didn't get crushed.

Sousuke's body started to feel numb. His head spun, and the cockpit alarm throbbed in his head. In the corner of his eye, he saw Kurz groveling on the ground, shielding Kaname.

"Ho!" Behemoth looked on. It had noticed them, too. There was no turning back. If Sousuke withdrew his mech now, Behemoth would crush Sousuke's friends.

I have to finish this here.

"Chidori, which hole is it?"

"What?"

"The cooling apparatus. Where is it?"

"Uh, well . . ." she said between large breaths. "It's a long, narrow slit—either on the left or the right. Aim and attack there, and use the Lambda Driver."

She sounded quite confident. A long, narrow slit. There was definitely one of those on the giant's lower back, near its hips. It faced downward, so it would be easy to hit. The only problem was that Sousuke wasn't totally sure how to use the Lambda Driver properly.

"Very well," Sousuke said, staggering the mech to its feet.

"Ho! Don't give up . . ." said Behemoth—no, said *Takuma*.

He sounded exhausted. Was he weakening?

"Time to die." The towering machine gripped its longsword with both hands, bringing it down with full force.

Sousuke barely avoided it with a quick dash forward. He lost a piece of his shoulder armor in the process.

When the sword hit the ground, it broke in two, halfway up.

Diving forward, Sousuke slid the Arbalest under the giant mech's crotch. He rolled and aimed his cannon upward at Behemoth's back.

A long, narrow slit . . . there it is. I'll aim for the right.

Concentrate. This isn't that hard.

The hard part is picturing my willpower going into the shell.

He had to believe the bullet would reach the target—or else, they'd have problems.

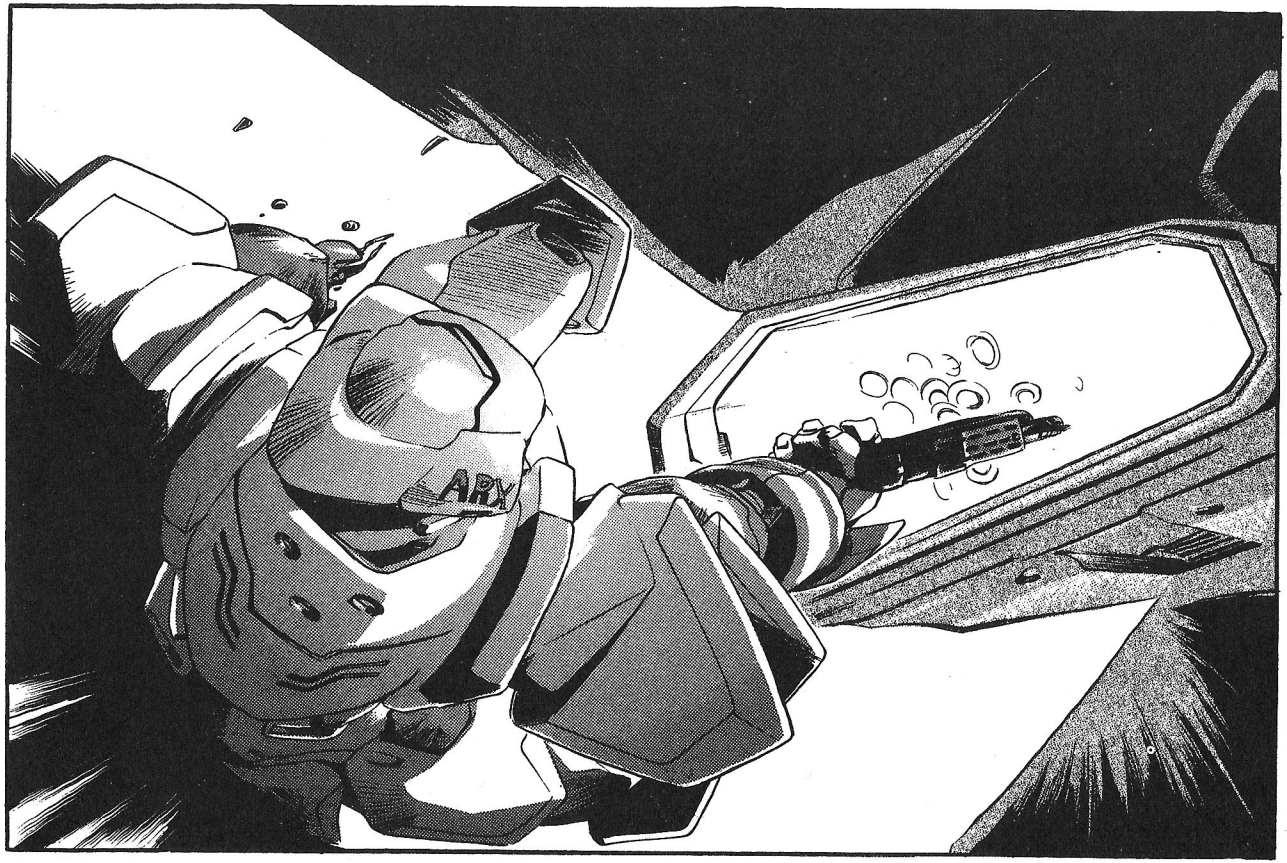
Eat this! he sneered as he discharged.

Again, the air around the Arbalest wavered.

The round flew. As always, Behemoth constructed its invisible barrier, which normally would stop the bullet midway. Like the last time, however, the bullet wasn't stopped but slowed, and the round bore forward at a slackened pace.

Like a snapped rubber band, the force field gave, and the shell struck Behemoth's back. *Pang!* Metal shards flew in all directions.

The shot went right into the center of the slit, deep into the giant's body. There was a smashing sound; visibly, however, the damage looked minimal. It seemed unlikely that anything would happen to this monstrosity from such minor damage.


ARX

For several seconds, nothing *did* happen. Neither the Arbalest nor the Behemoth moved.

Then, all of a sudden, the asphalt beneath the giant's feet cracked and the giant frame started to sink to the ground, as if the beast finally realized the enormity of its own weight.

Clank! The right knee bent. The heel shook, creaked, and started to break. The arms slumped downward toward the earth. The frame and propulsion systems screamed, and oil leaked from every joint. Pieces of armor fell from various spots and crashed to the ground. Behemoth's collapse had begun.

A moment later, its hip joint broke, and the gigantic mech crashed to the ground like a pile of bricks. All its joints disconnected.

There was no explosion, but parts of the torso caught fire.

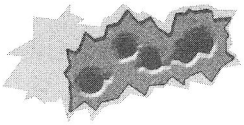
A cloud of dust mixed with the flames and smoke. *Clink, clink!* Small parts rolled on the floor.

That was it.

It was a remarkably short death scene.

"Wow, that's a surprise," Kaname muttered into the radio. "All I said was 'long, narrow slit.' I didn't think that'd work."

Completely spent, Sousuke dropped his mech's shot cannon.



Passing a hand over her pained face, as Teletha Testarossa stood to evacuate the exhibition center, she saw the heaped wreckage of Behemoth. *Oh!* It was the mother of all miscalculations to pass out during that kind of situation, but Sousuke and the others appeared to have pulled through it somehow. Perhaps thanks to Kaname Chidori—a Whispered like Tessa.

As much as I hate to admit it, she's really an extraordinary person, Tessa thought.

Behemoth collapsed for a simple reason: The giant's Lambda Driver had a false axis repulsive field that supported the mech's ridiculous weight. As soon as it quit working, the machine broke itself. It was like a whale beaching itself on Mercury, where its own massive weight would crush its internal organs.

So, they used the Lambda Driver to alleviate some of the weight. Mithril did not have that technology yet, but they had known it was possible. Certainly, however, to use the Lambda Driver on such a continual basis required a very special pilot—one with a mind altered by intense training and chemicals. That's why Takuma was so important to A21.

Even more remarkable was Takuma's ability to sustain carrying the weight while simultaneously creating the barrier against attacks. Apparently, the Behemoth utilized Black Technology more advanced than Mithril's.

The Arbalest knelt in front of the giant's flaming wreckage, next to a spherical capsule the size of a small car—Behemoth's cockpit shell. Sousuke must have pulled it from the wreckage.

Kaname and Kurz stood nearby as well.

"Tessa," called Kurz, the first to notice her. "You sure you're okay to be walking around?"

"I'm fine," she waved him off and stopped in front of the cockpit shell. "Can we open it?"

"Sure. Stand back."

Kurz drew his pistol before he pulled the cockpit's release lever. A few seconds later, the shell popped open with an explosive sound.

Takuma was inside, lying on his side. He wore a master suit to track his movements; it looked like a spacesuit.

"He's still alive. What should we do?"

Gently, Tessa pushed down Kurz's gun before approaching the boy.

"Takuma," she called quietly.

Takuma stirred slightly. "I lost, sister." His voice nearly disappeared as soon as it left his throat. "Why'd I lose?"

"I told you," Sousuke called through his mech's speaker, "you shouldn't—"

"You be quiet!" scolded Kaname.

"You haven't lost," Tessa answered, ignoring the squabble. "These things simply happen sometimes."

"That's terrible."

"Yes, it is, a terrible thing."

"There's nothing for me now. I have nothing."

Tessa took to her knee and touched Takuma's cheek, which was wet with sweat. She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "It's okay, Takuma. I'm here."

"Sis . . ."

"I'll always be with you."

"Really?"

"Yes. Sleep now. Be at peace."

"Yes. I'm sorry," he eked out before his eyes closed and he stopped moving.

Aware that she didn't want to be the kind of person to cry, Tessa shed no tears. Crying was a self-satisfying, futile act.

It's for the best, she thought.

Tessa stood up and stretched. "Good work, Mister Weber. You showed great skill, as always."

"Yeah, well." He held up a hand with fake modesty.

Tessa looked up at the Arbalest. *I've caused Sousuke nothing but trouble tonight,* she realized. On the other hand, he's the one who caused the feelings that made her act that way.

"Good work, Mister Sagara."

"It was nothing, Colonel."

"That mech is yours now. Please, take good care of it."

"Aye!" he saluted with the white AS. "Wait, what?"

"And finally, Kaname, I must offer you a special thanks."

"Fine, if you feel that way; I don't know why, though," Kaname snorted. "I still don't have a grip on any of this."

"True. I will try to explain everything I can . . . some other time."

"What?"

"Well, I'm pretty worn out right now," Tessa said, stretching. "However, I would like to make one thing perfectly clear now."

"Okay." Kaname stared blankly.

Tessa glanced up at Arbalest. "Sergeant Sagara, deactivate all auditory sensors. That's an order."

"Huh? Y-yes, ma'am." Sousuke quickly complied, and the mech's sensors went off.

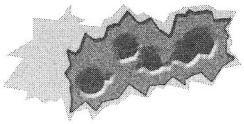
Convinced he could no longer hear the conversation, Tessa walked over to Kaname. She spoke in a near whisper. "The thing is, I've fallen in love with him."

"Oh."

"For now, may the best woman win, Kaname," Tessa declared, devoid of all maliciousness. With an odd smile, she actually looked her age for once.

"Oh, um, okay, I, uh . . ." Kaname faltered as Tessa walked away.

"Now, let's evacuate," Tessa ordered, "and see if Mister Kalinin and Miss Mao are safe."



On the roof of a building almost a half mile away from the mostly destroyed International Exhibition Center, two men watched through binoculars.

"Sure is cold," muttered one of the men, even though it was a summer's night.

"Honestly, I thought he would've fared a little better," commented the other man, whose little round glasses sat on his round nose.

"Well, it was like giving a toy to a Boy Scout. It would be wrong to hope for too much."

"Regardless, that was pathetic. That thing cost enough money for two cruisers! Gone in fifteen minutes. Absurd. I wonder what they're thinking upstairs."

"It isn't all for nothing. We got data on it—and video. Probably scared some people, too."

"Enough video to see the flaws in that thing. We don't need a mech like that at Amalgam."

"True, but there were other benefits."

"What other benefits?" growled the man wearing glasses.

"Heh heh! I got to see my precious boy and his little girlfriend again."

The man scowled through his glasses.

"Very soon, I'll drop in on them and say 'hello.' What a greeting that'll be . . ." Smiling to himself, the man limped away, stepping heavily on his artificial leg.



Epilogue

The morning news had a lot to work with: urban warfare in Ariake, an enormous AS that ran amok before self-destructing, speculation as to whether Tokyo Big Sight could be restored, and what kind of role the self-defense force played in the whole spectacle.

Of course, the conversations carried over into the classroom—but there was little opportunity to discuss them, due to impending exams! Instead, the students poured over notes, printouts, and notebooks. They favored vocabulary books over newspapers that morning.

Usually, Kyouko Tokiwa and Kaname quizzed each other before the exams started. That day, however, was different.

"Hey, Kana. Hey!" Kyouko persistently shook Kaname, who was face down on her desk. "You said you'd help me with my English, remember? Come on, wake up!"

"Unnn, just a few more minutes . . ." Kaname responded groggily.

"Man, did you stay up *that* late studying?" sulked Kyouko. "Did you pull an all-nighter or what?"

"I didn't sleep at all. I wasn't studying, though."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Fighting a war."

"Yeah, sure! Okay, whatever, forget it. I'll manage without you, Kana. Hey, hey, Sagara!"

Aware that Sousuke had grown up overseas and was fluent in English, Kyouko sought his help.

Sousuke sat completely still in the corner of the room.

"Sagara?"

He continued scowling toward the front of the room.

"Hello?"

No reaction. She waved her hand in front of his face, but he didn't notice. She leaned in closer to his face. His breathing was soft and systematic. *No way! Asleep with his eyes open!* Kyouko decided it was a rare and bizarre skill for him to have.

The classroom door opened.

"Take your seats!" shouted Eri Kagurazaka, as she entered. "Class starts now!"

Scurrying about, the students bowed before sitting.

"Good morning, everyone," chirped Eri, in very high spirits. "What a dangerous world we live in, eh? That's all the more reason to engage in the pursuit of knowledge. This is our last class before tests, so let's really study hard! Open your textbooks to page sixty-one."

In unison, the students all flipped through their books to the appropriate page. Kaname groggily managed to thumb through the pages, as well, whereas Sousuke remained still and silent. His desk was bare, and he stared sullenly into space.

"Did you forget your book, Sagara?"

No response.

"What's the matter? Answer me."

Nothing.

"Sagara?"

He continued to stare straight ahead.

"Wh-why are you making that scary face?" wincing a little, Eri walked toward Sousuke. "Sagara, are you trying to tell me you don't like my teaching style? If I'm doing something wrong, I can try to fix it. I don't think this attitude—"

Again, no response.

"Isn't the attitude a bit too much?"

Silence.

"Say *something,* Sagara. Hey."

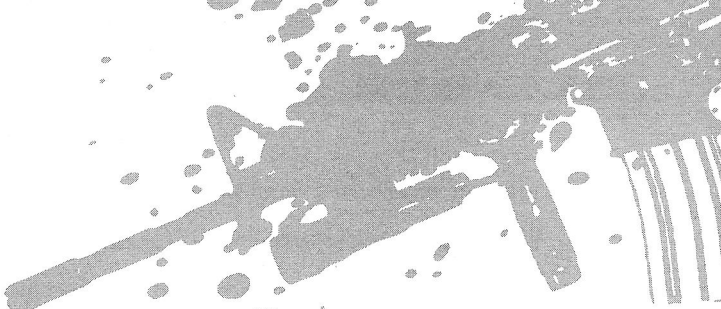
He stared her down.

Halfway to tears, she smacked his desk with her book. "Sagara!"

"Huh?" Leaping out of his chair, Sousuke pulled his pistol from his hip holster while grabbing the teacher by the nape of the neck with his other hand. In the same motion, he dragged her to the floor and brought the gun against her head.

Right then, Kaname delivered a vicious flying kick that knocked Sousuke unconscious.

And if Kyouko hadn't been there to explain everything, poor Eri might have fled the classroom crying.



AFTERWORD

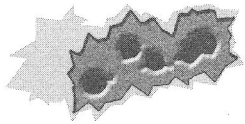
After some time, here we are again. Sousuke and Kaname spend their peaceful (?) days at Jindai High School until another formidable enemy launches an attack. This time, almost all the action occurs in Tokyo, and almost everything happens in the span of a day. Please, enjoy the second long installment of *Full Metal Panic: One Night Stand,* which probably could be classified as an "adventure installment."

Compared to the previous story, the character descriptions here are somewhat more in-depth. This is probably why, even though the plot is not super complex, I once again exceeded three hundred pages (so massive!). At first, I envisioned two hundred sixty pages—so, this is quite curious.

Authors are a timid breed, and when a book becomes so long, we start to worry about whether it will sell. Seeing as the thick *Fighting Boy Meets Girl* seems to have sold well (thanks to all you readers),

I felt a sense of relief that I wouldn't have to worry about sales in Japan. With regular bookstores constantly in short supply, I was embarrassed to be scolded about nobody having any copies left. So, to everyone who ran around looking for *Fighting Boy Meets Girl,* I'm sorry.

What else to write about? Hm, I can't think of anything. So, why don't we bring out a guest? I present the main character of this series, Sousuke Sagara. Let's give him a hand!



SS: You need something?

SG: Yeah, instead of talking about me, I had hoped you'd tell us something interesting.

SS: Very well. I'll present a rundown of the differences between the Lockheed and Boeing plans for the Joint Strike Fighter Program in North America.

SG: Don't.

SS: Okay, I'll explain why the machine guns in AS heads always use depleted-uranium ammunition. The same ammo is always in ATM ambushes, and—

SG: Stop.

SS: [Pause] How about I explain the fierce torture techniques of the South Korean marines as related to me by a Vietnam vet?

SG: I should've known . . . Never mind. Go home, Sousuke.

SS: I haven't received any training in the art of conversation, but I'm a good listener. Why don't you tell me about your life?

SG: Hm, my life . . . You know, the day before yesterday was Valentine's Day. A girl who is a fan gave me chocolate, and so did someone in the Fujimi editorial department. That made me happy.

SS: I see.

SG: But that chocolate came in while I was in a meeting with my editor, S. I should mention that S is a woman, and I didn't get any chocolate from her.

SS: I see. *[Crunch.]*

SG: Of course, I wish I had, even if it were only for the sake of tradition. It was kind of depressing.

SS: [Pause] I don't really understand why you crave chocolate so much, but this S—your editor—probably will be the first to read this, and it's a rather obvious insinuation.

SG: Yeah, but here's the thing: Yesterday, I told her I couldn't think about what to write for an afterword, and S said 'Why not

write about recent events, like Valentine's Day?' And she said it with such a smile. . . .

SS: Sounds like quite an animated woman.

SG: You sure don't understand the delicacy of a man's heart. I'm sad, dammit.

SS: That's fine, but you're starting to sound like Kurz. *[Crunch.]*

SG: Don't liken me to that idiot.

SS: That's what he would say. *[Crunch.]*

SG: Hey, what's that crunching sound, anyway?

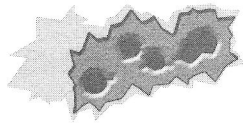
SS: Chocolate.

SG: What? Who gave *you* chocolate? Huh? Tell me!

SS: Sorry, that's classified. She forbid me to disclose it.

SG: Hmph. I probably can guess. I'll bet she put a heavy emphasis on the fact that it was just 'for the sake of tradition' when she gave it to you.

SS: [Obviously nervous] How'd you know that?



Goodness, look what page we're on already (checking my watch for some unknown reason)!

Once again, as I wrote, I had advice and cooperation from a lot of people. I thank you all once more.

So, I'll see you the next time we follow Sousuke through hell!

— Shouji Gatou, February 1999



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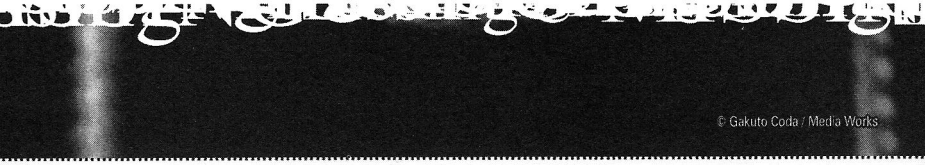
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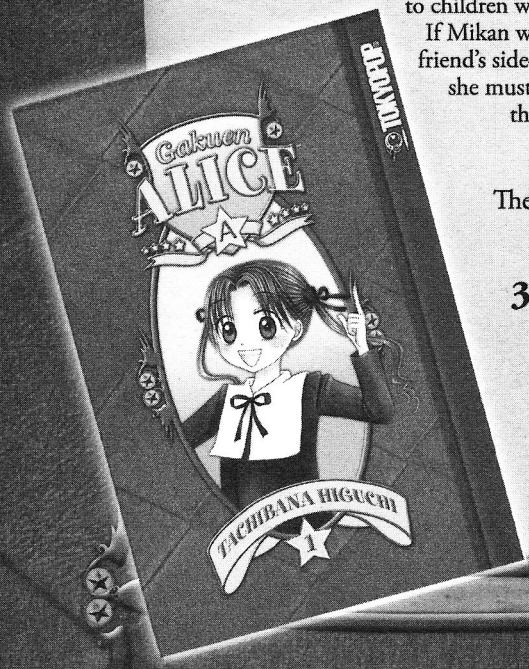
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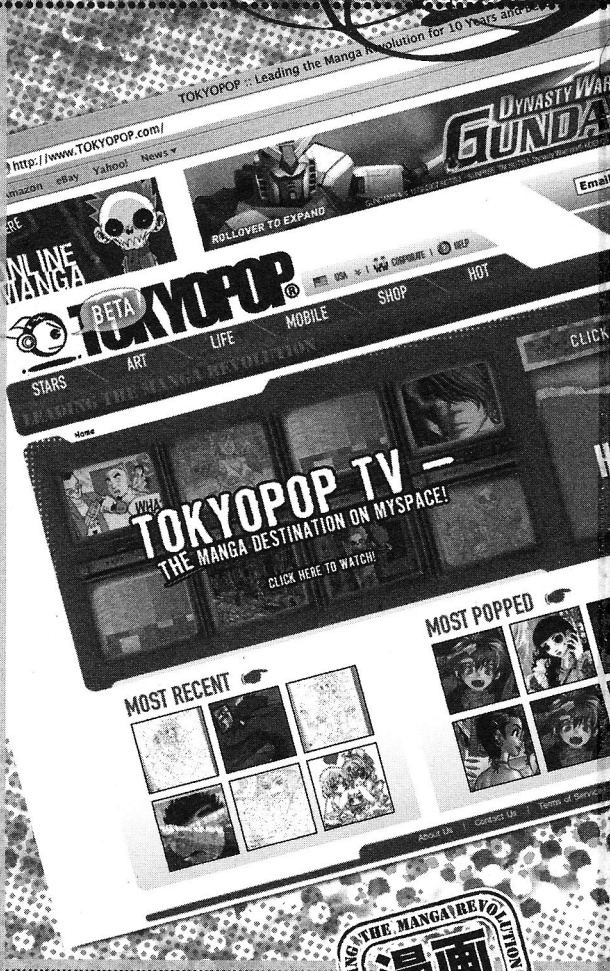
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